



MEDIA FREEDOM IN MOLDOVA: FRAGILITY, UNDUE RESTRICTIONS AND SELF-CENSORSHIP IN THE FACE OF POLARIZED POLITICS

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Moldova*

Moldova's diverse media are deeply affected by political, legal, financial and other challenges. Following Russia's aggression in Ukraine, authorities imposed emergency and legislative measures restricting media freedom without due process or proportionality. Journalists report harassment, threats, and pressures leading to self-censorship. In autonomous Gagauzia, this is compounded by non-compliance with national regulations. In Russian-occupied Transnistria, freedom of expression and independent reporting are suppressed. Moldova must align its laws with international obligations, protect journalists, and promote media freedom.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Moldova's media landscape is diverse and multilingual but deeply polarized, reflecting the country's geopolitical position, historical legacies, and economic constraints. Political polarization and hostile external influence—particularly from Russia's state-controlled media—combined with financial challenges faced by media outlets, create significant vulnerabilities for Moldova's media.

In recent years, authorities have enacted legislative measures that restrict media freedom and freedom of expression more broadly. They have justified these “war-time” measures as necessary to protect national security and counter Russian misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda. Under the state of emergency following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Parliament empowered the Commission for Exceptional Situations to impose “special rules” on media and enforce them without judicial oversight. The Commission suspended the licenses of some broadcasting media and blocked access to online resources. In one instance, the license suspension was challenged in court, but the judge failed to consider the decision's necessity and proportionality, and upheld it by arguing that it was compliant with the terms of the state of emergency and the Commission's powers.

This temporary regime was replaced by permanent legislation in an unexpected and arbitrary manner. The new law authorized the Council for the Promotion of Investment Projects of National Importance to revoke licenses of privately owned broadcasters without due process. Additionally, in June 2022, Parliament amended the Audiovisual Media Services Code to restrict retransmission of politically sensitive content from certain countries. The Venice Commission reviewed the amendments. It recognized that the Moldovan authorities were responding to a genuine issue in terms of “information security,” but warned that the measures did not meet the requirement of proportionality.

These developments have fostered uncertainty and self-censorship among media outlets. Journalists interviewed by Amnesty International expressed reluctance to scrutinize the ruling party, fearing retaliation or funding loss. Allegations of informal pressure and lack of protection from harassment—including online abuse and death threats—further undermine media freedom and public access to information.

Regional disparities exacerbate these issues. In Gagauzia, pro-Russian narratives are said to dominate the media space, and local practices are not compliant with national law. Independent outlets face harassment and cyberattacks, while new licensing initiatives risk imposing further barriers. In Russian-occupied Transnistria, media freedom is virtually absent. De facto authorities enforce severe restrictions modelled on Russian law, criminalizing dissent and obstructing journalists from Moldova through intimidation and detention.

Moldova is obligated under international human rights law to guarantee the right to freedom of expression, ensuring individuals and media actors can operate without undue interference. This includes establishing legal safeguards and ensuring that any interference meets requirements of legality, necessity, and proportionality, protecting journalists from threats, and promoting media pluralism. Authorities must align national laws with these obligations, end restrictions lacking due process guarantees, and review past exceptional measures. Threats against journalists must be investigated and prosecuted. A national strategy for media pluralism and sustainability should be developed with input from media and civil society. Authorities in Gagauzia must ensure compliance with Moldova's human rights obligations, and Russia and Transnistria's de facto authorities must cease restrictions and allow journalists to operate freely in the Russian-occupied region.

2. BACKGROUND

Moldova has a diverse and vibrant media landscape. A country of some two point four million people, it boasts at least 45 television channels (according to the Audio-Visual Council of the Republic of Moldova official list as of June 2025¹) and around 60 radio stations. There are over 70 newspapers, and a considerable number of online media outlets which, as such, are not included in the official list.² In their entirety, the media in Moldova present a diversity of views and opinions, analyses and reporting styles, and content genres. They publish and broadcast in several languages, with Romanian capturing the largest audience, closely followed by Russian.

Yet this visible diversity is intertwined with the country's polarized politics, and reflects the fragility not only of the country's media, but of the country itself – in the face of political, security, economic and cultural predicaments largely defined by Moldova's history and geography. In the early 1990s, Moldova's newly gained independence came with a military conflict that resulted in deaths and displacement of civilians, and the loss of government control over Transnistria region which has been housing Russia's 14th Guards Combined Arms Army (renamed "Operational group of Russian troops" in 1995), despite the Moldovan government's repeated demands that they be withdrawn and the 2018 UN General Assembly resolution which called for the complete and unconditional withdrawal of Russian forces from the region.³ By exercising overall control over Transnistria, both through the presence of its troops and through overall control over the de facto local authorities, Russia has been its occupying power. In the south, the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, comprised of three districts, was established shortly afterwards, following local secessionist demands.

Over the years of occupation, Russia's dominance over break-away Transnistria – militarily, politically and economically – has been increasingly entrenched, effectively giving Russia considerable leverage over Moldovan politics and affirming the direct and indirect threat posed by Russia for the rest of Moldova. Over the past two decades, Gagauzia's successive local elections consistently left its legislative body (People's Assembly) and the post of the local leader (Başkan) in control of parties and individuals with distinctly pro-Russian platforms. At the national level, successive majorities in the Moldovan parliament, as well as presidents and cabinets, reflected electoral swings between broadly defined pro-European and pro-Russian political choices.

Moldovan media, in their editorial policies, largely reflect this European-Russian societal split. Most media are aligned, to a greater or lesser degree, with either of these two geopolitical choices, and with their respective readership constituencies. As the governments in Moldova change, the media find themselves broadly in alliance with, or opposition to, the government, impacting their ability to be perceived as independent. The notion of editorial independence may thus be somewhat elusive, further impacted by the Moldovan media's sources of financing. The country's advertising market is small, and media income from subscriptions is too low to enable lasting and stable financial independence. Apart from national and regional public broadcasters reliant on state funding, many media outlets are funded by high-net-worth individuals; a lesser number is supported by grants from foreign governments and donor organizations. High-net-worth individuals typically drive the editorial policy and content of the media they own, albeit some of the journalists working for this type of private media stated in interviews with Amnesty International that their owners do not interfere with editorial

¹ Consiliul Audiovizualului al Republicii Moldova, *Registrul furnizorilor de servicii media de televiziune*, <https://consiliuaudiovizual.md/registers/registrul-furnizorilor-de-servicii-media-de-televiziune/> (accessed 11 November 2025).

² Independent Journalism Center (IJC), *The Media Market in Moldova: Realities and Trends*, April 2022: https://cji.md/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/IJC-study_The-Media-Market-in-Moldova-Realities-and-Trends-1.pdf (accessed 11 November 2025).

³ United Nations, "General Assembly Adopts Texts Urging Troop Withdraw from Republic of Moldova, Strengthening Cooperation in Central Asia," Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, GA/12030, 22 June 2018, <https://press.un.org/en/2018/ga12030.doc.htm> (accessed 11 November 2025).

policies. While some private media ownership structures are transparent, in other cases the ultimate beneficial owners are not clear, which has become a matter of security concern for the government in recent years (see below).

The proportion of Russian-language media among those owned by high-net-worth individuals is significant. According to Amnesty International's information seven privately owned TV channels broadcast all their content country-wide only in Russian, and another seven channels broadcast primarily in Russian with minor parts of the content, e.g. Romanian news, in Romanian. While the costs of media production, particularly of televised content, are very high, such media have a strong advantage, according to Moldovan media professionals. They shared in their interviews with Amnesty International that broadcast and online Russian-language media benefit from arrangements whereby they freely re-broadcast a considerable amount of Russian-produced media content, specifically by Russian TV channels. Given the continuing Russian aggression against Ukraine, the current Moldovan government's pursuit of European integration and EU membership, Chisinau's open support for Ukraine, and its standing demand to withdraw Russian forces in Transnistria, the provision of a platform for Russian television – the entirety of which is state-controlled, heavily politicized and widely used for propaganda, misinformation and disinformation – has proven particularly sensitive for Moldova.

A considerable share of the Moldovan media space is occupied by pro-European media outlets. Most use Romanian as the main language, and sometimes, depending on availability of funds, duplicate the content in Russian. Diverse in terms of ownership, all of them are heavily reliant on foreign grants, sometimes to the tune of 90 percent of their budget as told to Amnesty International, making their financial situation unstable and unpredictable. This vulnerability has been particularly keenly felt following the US's review of its foreign aid commitments under President Donald Trump.

According to several chief editors of the most popular pro-European media outlets, having foreign grants as the main source of income puts them in a vulnerable situation of “surviving from one grant application to another.”⁴ They cannot keep a stable number of staff as some positions may not be financed once the current grant runs out. Financial instability forces many young journalists to leave the profession, resulting in high staff turnover and a shortage of experienced media professionals. Lack of stable financing and insufficient human resources limit investigative journalism, and negatively impact thoroughness of fact checking, and other professional standards. Very often there are no funds for legal advice and representation while media are by their nature legally exposed.

Journalists working for pro-European media, interviewed by Amnesty International, shared that it is very difficult to compete with the Russian-language content provided by the pro-Russian media, which they receive ready-made and re-publish; this does not require much time, money or staff to produce. Moreover, as most of the pro-Russian (at the time of writing, pro-opposition) media are often owned and financed by high-net-worth individuals or private businesses, their financial capabilities and stability significantly exceed those of the pro-European, predominantly Romanian-language media.

On 14 March 2024, the Moldovan Parliament adopted the law on Media Subsidy Fund under which subsidies can be granted to media organizations. The Media Subsidy Fund uses financial resources allocated from state budget, donations, sponsorships, and grants provided by individuals and/or legal entities both from Moldova and from abroad. The evaluation of applications is carried out by the Council of Experts, under the Ministry of Culture. It has seven members: four appointed by the Press Council (a self-regulatory media body)⁵ and one member each of the ministries of Culture, Education and Research, and Finance.

⁴ In-person interview with Alina Radu, Chisinau, 1 May 2024.

⁵ Consiliul de Presă din Republica Moldova, *site oficial*, <https://www.consiliuldepresa.md/> (accessed 11 November 2025).

In 2025, the Media Subsidy Fund accumulated and partially disbursed 35 million Lei (Euro 1,76 million) to support three categories of media: national TV channels; regional TV/radio, newspapers and online media; and small media projects.

The suspension of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funding in January 2025 has had a detrimental effect on the work of many pro-European media in Moldova, many of which lost a significant source of funding as a result. They have had to halt some if not all activities and implement staff cuts.⁶

The national public broadcaster, state-owned Teleradio-Moldova (TRM) is mostly (around 90%) funded from the state budget.⁷ TRM's editorial oversight is provided by the Supervisory and Development Board consisting of seven members appointed by the Parliament for a six-year term. Three members are proposed by parliamentary factions, and four are put forward by civil society organizations. Its primary broadcasting language is Romanian, but a smaller share of the content is available in other languages (Russian, Gagauz, Ukrainian, Bulgarian and Romani).

Gagauzia has its regional public broadcaster, Gagauziya Radio Televizionu (GRT), using Russian and Gagauz languages. GRT is governed by the Supervisory Council appointed by the People's Assembly of Gagauzia and is primarily funded by the local authorities.⁸

The Russian occupied Transnistria also has a public broadcaster, the Transnistrian State Television and Radio Company, which reports to the de facto Ministry of Digital Development and Communications and is funded from the local budget. It broadcasts primarily in Russian.

3. METHODOLOGY

This report covers the situation with respect to the right to freedom of expression in the Republic of Moldova. It focuses on the media environment in Moldova that is closely linked to Moldova's geo-political position and on its diverse media market. Amnesty International examines the measures taken by the Moldovan government in the aftermath of February 2022 Russian aggression against Ukraine which, according to official statements received by Amnesty International, intend to ensure Moldova's national security. Amnesty International studied the measures, the potentially arbitrary nature of restrictions, along with their legality, necessity and proportionality.

The report focuses on the period between 24 February 2022 and March 2025 and is based primarily on interviews with media professionals and journalists working in Moldova, conducted mainly in person in Chisinau and mostly in April and May 2024; further interviews were mostly conducted remotely. Amnesty International has interviewed 30 journalists and media workers representing a variety of editorial positions.

Additionally, nine representatives of the Moldovan authorities were interviewed by Amnesty International in person and remotely, from April to October 2024; two representatives declined interviews. The officials and politicians contacted as part of this research were those from the government agencies with responsibilities concerning media regulation and issues of national security, and the Parliament.

⁶ Interviews with several media representatives, Chisinau, 30 April - 3 May 2025.

⁷ Teleradio-Moldova (TRM), *Raport privind executarea bugetului pentru 2024*, <https://trm.md/files/documente/rapoarte/rapoarte-de-activitate/Raport%20executarea%20bugetului%202024.pdf> (accessed 11 November 2025).

⁸ Общественная вещательная компания «Gagauziya Radio Televizionu» (GRT), *Отчет наблюдательного совета и руководства компании за 2022 год*, adopted 7 March 2023, <https://grt.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/otchet-grt-2022-god-got.pdf> (accessed 11 November 2025).

Interviews used a standardized questionnaire, and the full, informed consent of all interviewees was obtained prior to interview. Some interviewees requested anonymity, and it was granted.

Amnesty International also met with key stakeholders in Moldova including international and Moldovan human rights and civil society organizations, and conducted a review of reports from academics, international and Moldovan human rights organizations including Freedom House and the Independent Journalism Center, and studied the opinions from the European Commission for Democracy through Law (the Venice Commission) of the Council of Europe.

A draft version of the report was shared with Moldovan authorities. Amnesty International is grateful to the Audio-Visual Council of Moldova, for their response with comments received in a letter dated 9 October 2025. These comments have been incorporated into the body of the report where relevant.

4. INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Moldova is bound by a range of international and regional human rights instruments that guarantee and protect the right to freedom of expression. These legal obligations establish how states must ensure that individuals and media actors can freely express themselves, access information, and participate in public discourse without undue interference. The state must ensure a legal framework that protects expression, safeguards individuals (e.g., journalists) from private threats, guarantees access to information, and fosters media pluralism and diversity.

At the global level, the right to freedom of expression is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. Although not legally binding, the UDHR is considered a cornerstone of international human rights norms and reflects customary international law. Article 19 of the UDHR affirms that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, including the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Moldova further solidified its international obligations by ratifying the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1993. Article 19 of the ICCPR reaffirms the right to freedom of expression and outlines the narrow circumstances under which this right can be restricted. These restrictions must be clearly provided by law, pursue a legitimate aim such as protecting national security, public order, or the rights or reputation of others. The United Nations Human Rights Committee, which monitors implementation of the ICCPR, has emphasized in General Comment No. 34 that vague or overly broad legal formulations, or disproportionate restrictions, are incompatible with the Covenant.⁹

Regionally, Moldova is a member of the Council of Europe and a state party to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Article 10 of the ECHR guarantees the right to freedom of expression and imposes on states a duty to avoid interference with this right, except in narrowly defined circumstances. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has developed an extensive body of case law interpreting Article 10, consistently affirming the central role of media freedom and pluralism in democratic societies. The Court has held that states must tolerate a broad spectrum of opinions, particularly in matters of public and political concern, and that restrictions such as prior censorship or suspension of broadcasting licenses are subject to strict scrutiny.¹⁰

⁹ UN OHCHR, General comment No.34 on Article 19: Freedoms of opinion and expression, 29 July 2011, CCPR/C/GC/34, available at .

¹⁰ European Court of Human Rights (Registry), *Guide on Article 10 – Freedom of Expression*, updated 31 August 2024, https://ks.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr-ks/guide_art_10_eng-pdf (accessed 11 November 2025).

Although not an EU member state, Moldova has entered into an Association Agreement with the European Union, which includes clear commitments to democratic governance, rule of law, and respect for fundamental rights, including freedom of expression. The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, while not directly binding on Moldova, serves as a normative benchmark, particularly as the country progresses toward deeper integration with the EU as a candidate country. The European Commission has repeatedly underscored the importance of media freedom and judicial independence as critical components of Moldova's reform and accession path.¹¹

Taken together, these regional and international legal instruments form a comprehensive framework that Moldova is obligated to uphold. They require the state to ensure legal clarity in media and speech regulations, to protect journalists from harassment and violence, to provide effective legal remedies for rights violations, and to cultivate a pluralistic and independent media environment. Any legal, administrative, or political measure that restricts freedom of expression must meet the high standards of legality, legitimate aim, necessity, and proportionality as defined under international human rights law.

5. GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED TERRITORY OF MOLDOVA

5.1 AUTHORITIES' RESPONSE TO RUSSIAN MEDIA INFLUENCE

In recent years, the Moldovan authorities have passed legislative measures that have effectively limited media freedom and freedom of expression more broadly. They argued such measures were needed due to national security considerations, and the destructive "foreign" (meaning "Russian") influence via misinformation, disinformation and propaganda – particularly in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The contributing factors behind this argument have been the extensive use of the Russian state television and other Russian media (including privately owned) to propagate Russia's narrative justifying its war of aggression against Ukraine, including negation of the crimes under international law committed by Russian forces or putting the blame for them, and for the war itself, on Ukraine;¹² to attack Moldova's state institutions and policies, including by disseminating manifestly false claims or misrepresenting facts;¹³ and the recurring credible allegations of Russian interference in Moldovan elections.¹⁴

The Moldovan government's argument is that malevolent Russian media content impacts the country's security, public order and legitimate governance and thus needs to be countered. The government's response and the restrictions imposed on the right to freedom of expression and

¹¹ European Commission (DG NEAR), *Moldova Report 2024: Commission Staff Working Document SWD(2024) 698 final*, chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights), p. 36, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/moldova-report-2024_en, p. 36 (accessed 11 November 2025).

¹² For a detailed illustration of this practice, see for example Amnesty International, *Ukraine: "Children": The attack on the Donetsk Regional Academic Drama Theatre in Mariupol*, report, 30 June 2022, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur50/5713/2022/en/>.

¹³ For an illustration, see for instance the programme AntiFake of 21 October 2024 on the federal Russian channel TV1, available online at <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/antifeyk/vypuski/antifeyk-vypusk-ot-21-10-2024>, which was timed to coincide with the presidential election and the referendum on EU accession held in Moldova.

¹⁴ European Parliament, "Parliament condemns Russia's interference in Moldova," *Press Release*, 3 October 2024, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20241003IPR24421/parliament-condemns-russia-s-interference-in-moldova> (accessed 11 November 2025).

particularly on media freedom, raise questions in terms of their compliance with the requirement of legality, necessity and proportionality.

5.2 MAKING A CASE FOR MEDIA RESTRICTIONS WITHOUT JUDICIAL OVERSIGHT

These difficult questions also arise for international watchdogs in their response to the Moldovan government's actions (e.g., see cited below the Venice Commission's acknowledgement of the real threats posed by Russian media to Moldova's security). Amnesty International has addressed these to Moldovan government officials interviewed for this publication.

A high-ranking official who requested anonymity shared in an interview that the circumstances, and the country's security have created the need for the authorities "to improvise" against media-related threats posed by Russia. Ordinarily, the official media regulator, the Audio-Visual Council, is responsible for enforcing national legal requirements, including by upholding or cancelling broadcasting licenses, subject to judicial review. This, according to the source, was the approach suitable for "peace time", compounded by the challenges posed by the "dysfunctionality" and slowness of the courts. As a "war-time measure," the Moldovan authorities needed to be able to initiate and promptly see through suspensions of broadcasting licenses.¹⁵ These remarks were made with regard to a range of media restrictions introduced without judicial oversight and implemented from 2022 to 2024.

5.3 THE USE OF STATE OF EMERGENCY MEASURES

On 24 February 2022, while a nation-wide state of emergency imposed on 20 January 2022 was in force (introduced in response to the energy crisis)¹⁶ the Parliament of Moldova super-imposed a new state of emergency, in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.¹⁷

At the time of writing, the state of emergency is regulated by the 2004 Law on the Regime of the State of Emergency, Siege and War. In each specific instance it is introduced by a parliamentary decision which outlines the specific tasks in front of the Commission for Exceptional Situations (CES, the highest ad hoc executive body consisting of representatives of key ministries and other government agencies, including the Security and Intelligence Service, and chaired by the Prime Minister). The parliamentary decision formulates these tasks as the CES's exceptional powers necessitated by the specific emergency circumstances. The CES's tasks (exceptional powers) introduced under the 24 February 2022 state of emergency were time-limited, although some of their effects were not, as is the case with media freedom.

The 24 February 2022 state of emergency decision gave the CES the powers of "introduction of special rules for the use of telecommunications, the fight against misinformation, fake news and hate speech."¹⁸ This provision was used by the Security and Intelligence Service (SIS), acting upon the authorities delegated to it by the CES, between February 2022 and September 2024, to block without due process access to more than 70 websites that "distributed content that threatened national security in the context of emergency situation, by spreading hatred and fake news about the war in

¹⁵ In person interview in Chisinau, 2 May 2024.

¹⁶ Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Decision on the Declaration of the State of Emergency, 20 January 2022, available at <https://rm.coe.int/1680a5a3eb> (accessed 11 November 2025).

¹⁷ Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Decision on the Declaration of the State of Emergency, 24 February 2022, available at <https://rm.coe.int/1680a5b609> (accessed 11 November 2025).

¹⁸ Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Decision on the Declaration of the State of Emergency, 24 February 2022, Art. 2(13.C), available at <https://rm.coe.int/1680a5b609> (accessed 11 November 2025).

Ukraine”¹⁹ or posed “risks to national security in the context of emergency situation, by spreading content that incites war and hatred.”²⁰

The CES used its powers to suspend without judicial oversight the broadcasting licenses of six TV channels in December 2022 because of “the lack of correct information reflecting national events, and also the war in Ukraine, during the state of emergency.”²¹

This decision was widely condemned, including by civil society organizations who pointed out that the government had taken an approach to restrict an important freedom without due process.²²

Nonetheless, six more channels had their license suspended in October 2023 by the CES upon the SIS’s request, under the same state of emergency provisions.

The suspensions were challenged by six media companies in court but were not reverted and have led to the permanent withdrawal of broadcasting licenses of all six TV channels.²³ Amnesty International studied the circumstances of the license suspension and the consequent withdrawal of Primul în Moldova, the channel that had been launched in collaboration with Russia’s state-controlled Channel One. It was operating under Moldovan regulations and broadcasting mostly in Romanian and provided a mix of local Moldovan programming and content licensed from Russia’s Channel One including entertainment, news, and cultural shows. Russia’s Channel One is a state-controlled national TV channel that actively disseminates Russian official domestic and foreign policy narratives, including disinformation and misinformation about Ukraine, Moldova and other countries, and is a key vehicle of Russian propaganda at home and abroad. However, specific content broadcast by Primul în Moldova deemed lacking “correct information reflecting national events, and also the war in Ukraine”²⁴ and which led to the license suspension, was unclear.

A journalist who had worked for Primul în Moldova told Amnesty International that the court’s decision was “not impartial” and accused the courts of “doing the bidding of the government.”²⁵

In its decision, which is publicly available, the court considered narrowly whether the decision to suspend the license was consistent with the terms of the state of emergency and the CES’s powers as

¹⁹ Mediacritica, “„Clone” ale site-urilor Sputnik, blocat pentru incitare la ură, dezordini în masă sau război, rămân accesibile în Republica Moldova. Explicațiile SIS,” 7 February 2023, <https://mediacritica.md/clone-ale-site-urilor-blocate-de-sis-pentru-incitare-la-ura-dezordini-in-masa-sau-razboi-in-continuare-accesibile-in-moldova-cum-explica-institutia> (accessed 11 November 2025).

²⁰ Serviciul de Informații și Securitate (SIS), “(Update) Sursele informaționale care distribuie știri false, informații care instigă la ură, război sau violență rămân în atenția SIS”: <https://sis.md/en/content/update-sis-focused-sources-spreading-fake-news-and-information-incites-hatred-war-or> (accessed 11 November 2025).

²¹ Comisia pentru Situații Excepționale a Republicii Moldova, *Dispoziția nr. 54 din 16 decembrie 2022*: <https://social.gov.md/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Dispozitia-Comisiei-pentru-Situatii-Exceptionale-nr.-54-din-16.12.2022.pdf> (accessed 11 November 2025).

²² Independent Journalism Center (IJC), “Media NGOs urge authorities to provide extensive explanations for the factual and legal circumstances justifying the CES Decision,” 20 December 2022, <https://cji.md/en/media-ngos-urge-authorities-to-provide-extensive-explanations-for-the-factual-and-legal-circumstances-justifying-the-ces-decision/> (accessed 11 November 2025).

²³ “Contestația posturilor TV împotriva deciziei prin care CSE le-a suspendat licențele de emisie în decembrie 2022, respinsă de prima instanță,” 5 February 2024, <https://media-azi.md/contestatia-posturilor-tv-impotriva-deciziei-prin-care-cse-le-a-suspendat-licentele-de-emisie-in-decembrie-2022-respinsa-de-prima-instanta/> (accessed 11 November 2025).

²⁴ “Contestația posturilor TV împotriva deciziei prin care CSE le-a suspendat licențele de emisie în decembrie 2022, respinsă de prima instanță,” 5 February 2024: <https://media-azi.md/en/contestatia-posturilor-tv-impotriva-deciziei-prin-care-cse-le-a-suspendat-licentele-de-emisie-in-decembrie-2022-respinsa-de-prima-instanta/> (accessed 11 November 2025).

²⁵ Remote interview via Microsoft Teams, 12 September 2024

outlined in the respective parliamentary decision. It did not consider the question of necessity and proportionality of the CES's decision, nor of the relevant parliamentary decision which had given the CES the respective powers.²⁶

Many of the channels whose licenses were suspended chose not to appeal the decision. They gave up their broadcasting licenses and proceeded to disseminate their content via “back-up channels” or move their activity entirely to YouTube.

According to Liliana Vițu, Chair of the regulatory authority for TV and radio, the Audio-Visual Council of Moldova, the license suspension by the CES reflected the CES's limits. Notably, she took the view that the reasons behind the suspension were “right and justified,” and that the media space had to be better regulated, especially at the time of a neighbouring country facing military aggression. She took the view that a judicial review – should the government opt for court proceedings before suspending broadcasting licenses – could be very lengthy. She also stated that such measures should be restricted to a specific period and scope.²⁷

The license suspensions without judicial oversight by the CES were met with disapproval by representatives of both pro-European (pro-government) and pro-Russian (pro-opposition) media interviewed by Amnesty International. They argued that the suspensions were arbitrary and created a dangerous precedent, and also ineffective in countering disinformation and fake news, as the TV channel simply transferred their broadcast content to other platforms.

“The suspension of licenses was not transparent. There was no clarity of process, and it created a dangerous precedent. [...] Furthermore, it was not effective. It is not a problem to open a new website or broadcast on YouTube – that is completely not regulated,” shared Cornelia Cozonac, a journalist with the Centre of Journalists Investigations.²⁸

5.4 POST-STATE OF EMERGENCY RESTRICTIONS WITHOUT JUDICIAL OVERSIGHT

The state of emergency was extended by Parliament, for almost a year, and expired on 30 December 2023. Media representatives interviewed by Amnesty International believe that the decision not to extend the state of emergency any further was dictated by the forthcoming presidential election in autumn 2024, which could not be held if it remained in force.

By law, with the lifting of the state of emergency, the previously introduced suspensions of broadcasting licenses ceased to be in force, and the government was unable to deploy this practice. Some of the affected media unable to resume broadcasting, either by choice or due to the lasting financial or other consequences of the license suspension.

The authorities resolved this “predicament” in a way which was unexpected and arbitrary, both in terms of the solution itself and the legislative route taken. At the time, Parliament was considering draft legislation, the purpose of which was to ensure “integrity and functionality of the electricity market.”²⁹ Just four days before the final vote on the bill on 22 December 2023, a new provision was inserted into it by a ruling party member of Parliament and Chairman of the Economic, Budget and Finance Committee, Radu Marian. This last-minute move prevented public discussion of the bill.

²⁶ Judecătoria Chișinău – Instanțe de judecată, https://jc.instante.justice.md/ro/pigd_integration/pdf/NDZjNzhiYjYtZGExYi00YjNlTkt1OTMtNTJmNWEONWVmNmNjA4 (accessed 11 November 2025).

²⁷ In person interview with Liliana Vițu, Chisinau, 3 May 2024.

²⁸ In person interview with Cornelia Cozonac, Chisinau, 30 April 2024.

²⁹ Independent Journalism Center (IJC), “Statement: We condemn the new mechanism for the suspension of TV licenses and the lack of transparency in its legislative process,” 16 January 2024: <https://cji.md/en/statement-we-condemn-the-new-mechanism-for-the-suspension-of-tv-licenses-and-the-lack-of-transparency-in-its-legislative-process/> (accessed 11 November 2025).

Moldova retains a strong civil society which has on many occasions acted as a constructive check-and-balance mechanism preventing adoption of questionable legislation, but this move effectively precluded its intervention.

The new legislative provision was adopted, giving the Council for the Promotion of Investment Projects of National Importance (CPIPNI) a non-judicial authority to suspend or withdraw broadcasting licenses of privately owned TV and radio channels. This authority was envisaged as a preventive measure, should the CPIPNI conclude there were “reasonable suspicions regarding the involvement of the ultimate beneficiaries of the company in activities affecting security of the state.”³⁰ In other words, the CPIPNI was given the power to apply direct, severe sanctions to media outlets either belonging to physical and legal persons of interest to the security services, or merely suspected of belonging to such persons due to opaque ownership arrangements. Similar to the state of emergency arrangement, this new route circumvents judicial oversight and the need for the government to prove its case in an open court hearing. It is similarly open to abuse.

In a joint statement, Moldovan human rights and other civil society organizations denounced the legislative process granting the CPIPN power to suspend broadcast licenses. They argued that legislative practice which undermines transparency and does not include public consultation, especially in the content of media freedom, is particularly concerning.³¹

Despite this and other criticism, the Moldovan authorities have enacted new, related legislation. Since December 2023, at least 18 TV and radio channels have had their licenses suspended by the CPIPN based on the same reasoning. The most recent (at the time of writing) is TV channel TVC 21 whose license was suspended in late March 2025 for 60 days.³² At the later time of writing, TVC 21 channel was broadcasting.

TVC 21 is an opposition channel, and, in the past, has often criticized the governmental and Moldova’s ruling party policy. A 60-day broadcast interruption put TVC 21 at risk of losing its audience and consequently its operations (at the time of writing the TVC 21 channel was known to continue broadcasting).

The effects of the suspensions on other media, as experienced by their journalists, are explained below.

5.5 INTRODUCTION OF VAGUE AND OVERLY RESTRICTIVE LEGISLATION

Besides the new powers given to and exercised by the CES under the state of emergency legislation, and the CPIPNI after December 2023, legislative changes were introduced for the purpose of “protection of the national audiovisual space” (the legal term from the Audiovisual Media Services Code)³³ from the risks posed by Russia, including the spread of disinformation and justification of the war of aggression. In June 2022, Parliament passed amendments to the Audiovisual Media Services Code that were soon thereafter signed into law by the President. They introduced a legal definition of

³⁰ Government of the Republic of Moldova (archived), *Decision of Moldova’s Council for the Promotion of Investment Projects of National Importance*, available at: <https://old.gov.md/en/content/decision-moldovas-council-promotion-investment-projects-national-importance> (accessed 11 November 2025).

³¹ Independent Journalism Center (IJC), *Statement Regarding the New Legal Mechanism for Suspending Licenses of Audiovisual Media Service Providers*, 27 March 2024: <https://cji.md/en/statement-regarding-the-new-legal-mechanism-for-suspending-licenses-of-audiovisual-media-service-providers/> (accessed 11 November 2025).

³² The Council for the Promotion of Investment Projects of National Importance, Decision 19, 24 March 2025, available at: https://gov.md/sites/default/files/media/documents/2025-04/pr_verbal_19.pdf (accessed on 11 November 2025).

³³ The Audiovisual Media Services Code, Art. 1.

disinformation alongside additional restrictive requirements for broadcast media and new penalties for repeated violation of the requirements, including fines and suspension of broadcasting licences.

This legislation used the wording of “countries other than the Member States of the European Union, the United States, Canada and the states that have ratified the European Convention on Transfrontier Television” to restrict re-broadcasting of Russian-produced content in particular (Russia being a country that had signed but not ratified the respective Convention). Under the amended Audiovisual Media Services Code, broadcasting and retransmission of “audiovisual television and radio programmes with informative, informative-analytical, military and political content” produced elsewhere is prohibited, as is re-broadcasting of “audiovisual programmes which, regardless of their [country of] origin, justify wars of aggression, deny war crimes and crimes against humanity, or incite hatred.”³⁴ The rules are monitored and enforced by the Audio-Visual Council of Moldova, which can issue warnings and impose penalties on media service providers, including fines and suspension or withdrawal of licenses.

The new media restrictions proposed (in draft form June 2022, and later implemented) via these amendments were reviewed by the Venice Commission. The Commission’s experts took the view that these restrictions had to “be considered in the light of the severe restrictions on the freedom of media in the Russian Federation and the one-sided and propagandistic reporting of Russian media,”³⁵ and acknowledged that “the Republic of Moldova was heavily exposed to external sources of information and a constant target of disinformation activities from external sources,”³⁶ and that “there is little doubt that in principle, the adoption of Law No. 143 which seeks to enhance information security responds to a pressing social need.”³⁷ The Venice Commission thus took the view that the measures could be regarded as pursuing a legitimate aim and necessary to achieve such an aim, but warned that the requirement of proportionality required further consideration. It noted that “while the content-based approach is legitimate, the origin-based approach ... seems more problematic. The proportionality of the different measures therefore needs to be examined more in detail.”³⁸

The Venice Commission noted that some of the origin-based restrictions constituted “severe interference with the editorial independence and the freedom of journalism,”³⁹ and warned that the sanctions introduced by the law were “also problematic.” Referring specifically to the revocation of a broadcasting licence, “the ultimate sanction with respect to the media”, the Venice Commission expressed concern about the vagueness and lack of foreseeability of the wording describing the conditions and timing for its application “after the penalties provided for in this paragraph have been gradually applied.” Additionally, the Venice Commission noted the vagueness of some terms such as “propaganda of military aggression”, “extremist content”, “military content”, “militaristic content” and

³⁴ The Audiovisual Media Services Code, Art. 17(4b).

³⁵ Para. 88, <https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD%282022%29026-e> (accessed 11 November 2025).

³⁶ Para. 90, <https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD%282022%29026-e> (accessed 11 November 2025).

³⁷ Para. 91, <https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD%282022%29026-e> (accessed 11 November 2025).

³⁸ Para. 92, <https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD%282022%29026-e> (accessed 11 November 2025).

³⁹ Para. 95, <https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD%282022%29026-e> (accessed 11 November 2025).

“content of a terrorist nature.”⁴⁰ The Venice Commission also warned of the risk of this vagueness having “a chilling effect on the media pushing them to resort to self-censorship.”⁴¹

In a similar vein, in its 2024 Report on Moldova, the European Commission urged the Moldovan authorities to “review the new mechanism on suspension of TV channels that cannot prove their final beneficial owner [...and bring it] in line with EU and international standards.”⁴²

This new legislation was also criticized by international freedom of expression watchdogs. Thus, Freedom House pointed to the new amendments’ lack of legal clarity and transparency: “The Audiovisual Code should distinguish more clearly the differences between these issues [propaganda and disinformation]. This mixing of ideas and the equal treatment of these different types of content is also clear in the nature of sanctions and fines applied. Hence, the overall approach is a threat to freedom of expression as self-regulation is undermined, and the concept of ‘accurate information’ is vague and general.”⁴³ Freedom House highlighted the need for clearer and more precise legislation to ensure that measures against disinformation do not infringe on media freedom and freedom of expression.

The introduction of the overly restrictive legislation and the use of vague terms has left the Moldovan media – already vulnerable in ways explained above – even more vulnerable to abusive measures applied selectively by the government, with self-censorship further stimulated.

5.6 ARBITRARY NATURE OF DELICENSING DECISIONS AND THEIR STIFLING EFFECT ON MEDIA

The arbitrary and non-transparent nature of delicensing of broadcasters in Moldova without due process sows speculation, confusion and uncertainty, and makes the country’s media who are already vulnerable, even more vulnerable. Importantly, this increased vulnerability is felt across all media outlets, both pro-Russian and pro-European. All media outlets, however aligned with, or critical to, the government of the day, are exposed to arbitrary treatment going forward.

Amnesty International interviewed journalists who worked for three media outlets whose licenses were suspended by either the CES or CPIPNI. They see delicensing decisions and the government’s media policies broadly, as a crackdown on free expression, and all of them took the view that, as one stated: “freedom of expression and media freedom do not exist anymore in Moldova.”

All of them explained the penalties against their particular outlets to be the result of their opposition to the government, its pro-European policies, or government-supported narrative on Russia’s war against Ukraine.

A presenter from an opposition media said that there are certain topics on which “only one opinion is acceptable”, e.g., the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Any attempt to provide a narrative alternative to that from Ukraine and the EU (or what the interviewee described as presenting “a more balanced”

⁴⁰ Para. 103, <https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD%282022%29026-e> (accessed 11 November 2025).

⁴¹ Para. 86, <https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD%282022%29026-e> (accessed 11 November 2025).

⁴² European Commission, Republic of Moldova 2024 Report, Brussels 30.10.2024 (SWD(2024) 698 final), p. 37, available at: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/858717b3-f8ef-4514-89fe-54a6aa15ef69_en?filename=Moldova%20Report%202024.pdf (accessed 11 November 2025).

⁴³ Freedom House, *Reform of Oversight Mechanisms: Bolstering Media Freedom in Moldova*, May 2024, p.7, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/fh-mf_Oversight-Reform-2024_Eng.pdf (accessed 11 November 2025).

perspective), in particular by also sharing the Russian authorities' position on the war, would result in punitive measures such as licence suspension.⁴⁴

An opposition media journalist shared that the channel was boycotted by the ruling party's members, who stopped accepting invitations to interviews, because of its policy of providing a platform for different politicians, including those from the opposition parties. The journalist claimed that the channel was closely monitored by the Audio-Visual Council on the government's request, with a directive "to find something" that would justify the suspension.⁴⁵

In its reply of 9 October 2025, the Audio-Visual Council of Moldova categorically refuted this claim, and emphasized the Council's operational autonomy and freedom from political influence by the executive.

A journalist from one of the opposition channels who challenged the license suspension in court and lost, said that the suspension of the broadcasting license was caused by what she termed "propaganda by silence." She was referring to the channel's policy of not commenting on the Russian war against Ukraine at all and avoiding the subject altogether. The journalist also shared that after some of her interviews with ruling party members or government officials, which she believed had made these officials uncomfortable, she "unofficially" received "hints behind the scene" expressing discomfort about the channel's work.⁴⁶ The journalist believes that the channel was delicensed for two reasons: its criticism of the ruling party and giving a platform to the opposition, and the channel's policy on the war in Ukraine.

Amnesty International is unable to attest these views or verify these claims. The organization has not received any reply from the government in response to these.

Without a clear and detailed public justification for the delicensing decisions, let alone in the absence of an open judicial review, affected media, other (including pro-European) media and commentators are left to wonder and speculate about the exact, specific reasons. What is more, this leaves all media in a state of uncertainty, and serves to promote the toxic culture of self-censorship.

5.7 THE CULTURE OF SELF-CENSORSHIP

Among the pro-European media, the culture of self-censorship appears very common. Several representatives of such media told Amnesty International that they have to exercise discretion in criticizing or scrutinizing the government or the ruling party's members (pro-European, at the time of writing). A journalist and current President of Moldova Press Council, Viorica Zaharia stated that many media are "shy" in criticizing the ruling party and its leadership. Cornelia Cozonac from the Centre of Journalist Investigations, explained how political polarization and media's vulnerability further underscores the culture of self-censorship: "They, the current authorities, do not want to be questioned or investigated. They are very sensitive to these things. And we journalists, we are wary of the [political] alternative, and that is why we forgive them more than anyone else [any previous government] before."

Three separate sources from Moldova's media community complained to Amnesty International that displeasing individual members of the ruling party could result in their media outlets losing access to foreign grant-based funding. Amnesty International was provided evidence by one of the sources suggesting that media support for the ruling party agenda would ensure uninterrupted foreign grants-based funding. Two other sources independently stated that they had similar experiences, i.e., individual(s) who claimed to have influence over foreign funders' decisions on grants for independent

⁴⁴ In person interview, Chisinau, 3 May 2024.

⁴⁵ In person interview, Chisinau, 3 May 2024.

⁴⁶ Remote video interview via Microsoft Teams, 12 September 2024.

media promised uninterrupted funding in exchange for positive coverage of the ruling party's pro-European agenda.

5.8 VULNERABILITY EXPLOITED

The operational, financial and political vulnerability of Moldova's media significantly affects individual journalists too, and not only via job insecurity (as explained above). Several journalists complained to Amnesty International about online bullying and threats they have received for investigating and criticizing a pro-Russian political party.

Alina Radu, the director of Moldova's prominent investigative journalism outlet, Ziarul de Gardă, stated: "If we publish an investigation about Șor [Party],⁴⁷ online bullying starts straight away. They spread false messages not only about me but about my family. It has reputational and personal effects. Many journalists are afraid to use their real names." Another journalist from Ziarul de Gardă received a death threat in comment to a YouTube video investigation about the Șor Party's involvement into organizing and financing anti-government protests in 2022. The comment says: "Don't criticize, or someone will cut your head off. You have my word. Yes, kids, we'll cut your heads off for real."⁴⁸

TV8 reporter Viorica Tătaru also received a death threat online, in a private message after her coverage of the protests allegedly organized by the same pro-Russian party where she tried to interview the participants: "You will get a bullet in the head from someone for your questions." Viorica Tataru told Amnesty International: "I always apply some security measures if monitoring Șor protests. For example, I must always know where the police are."⁴⁹

Journalists interviewed by Amnesty International claimed they have reported instances of online threats to the police, after which investigations have been opened, but the Internet remains challenging for regulation and for identifying the perpetrators.

Online bullying or threats against journalists are a violation of the right to freedom of expression, and undermine both media freedom and the public's right to receive information. When journalists are threatened the state has a legal obligation to protect them and ensure they can do their work safely. Failing to investigate or act to prevent these threats enables impunity. Journalists interviewed by Amnesty International shared their sense that the authorities are not adequately equipped, nor show much willingness, to address the issue of online bullying and threats.

Online bullying and threats have a chilling effect on media freedom and freedom of expression.

⁴⁷ Șor Party originated in the late 1990s and took its current name in 2016 when the oligarch-turned-politician Ilan Șor became its president. A criminal suspect under house arrest at the time, Ilan Șor was convicted under economic crime charges the following year and dealt a prison sentence. He absconded from house arrest and secretly left the country while awaiting an appeal hearing against his sentence. The Șor party won seven seats in the Parliament in the 2019 elections, but was declared "unconstitutional" by the Constitutional Court of Moldova in 2023 and banned. Some of its remaining members joined a new political party formed and funded by Ilan Șor remotely, from Russia. The party adopted a name the abbreviation of which sounds the same, and is commonly referred to as "Șor Party" including by the journalists interviewed for this publication. Ilan Șor is also alleged by the authorities to be clandestinely funding some pro-Russian media in Moldova.

⁴⁸ Independent Journalism Center (IJC), "Media NGOs call on law enforcement bodies to punish those who made murder threats against journalists," 27 October 2022: <https://cji.md/en/media-ngos-call-on-law-enforcement-bodies-to-punish-those-who-made-murder-threats-against-journalists/> (accessed 11 November 2025)

⁴⁹ In person interview with Alina Radu, Chisinau, 1 May 2024.

5.9 THE AUTONOMOUS TERRITORIAL UNIT OF GAGAUZIA

The media space in autonomous Gagauzia is also polarized, and visibly dominated by pro-Russian media, which also reflects the local politics. Thus, the last elected regional leader (Başkan) Evgeniya Guşul was endorsed and supported by the pro-Russian Şor Party.

Gagauzia (as well as Transnistria, see below) was described by media professionals interviewed by Amnesty International as a region where media freedom was heavily restricted, and where the narrative is controlled by local authorities who favour closer ties with Russia, demonize EU integration and tend to use the official Russian narrative about Russia's war against Ukraine.

The largest local media outlet is Gagauziya Radio Televizionu (GRT), the region's public broadcaster. On its official website (<https://grt.md>), GRT describes itself – notably, in Russian – as “the only broadcaster in the world broadcasting predominantly in the Gaguz language.” The website's content – including the GRT's description and all key information – is provided mostly or only in Russian, with a minority of featured pieces, as well as recorded news bulletins, appearing in Gagauz and Romanian. GRT is directly funded almost entirely by the Gagauz Autonomous Territorial Unit's budget,⁵⁰ and its Supervisory Board is appointed by the local legislature, the People's Assembly. The Supervisory Board, in turn, appoints key executives and directly controls GRT's editorial policy.⁵¹

Vitali Gaidarji, the leader of the local media watchdog Media Birlii - Uniunia Media, in his June 2024 report for Freedom House argued that freedom of speech is restricted in Gagauzia. He claimed that a Şor Party representative was appointed GRT's executive director in 2022, and that this demonstrated “political capture of large media outlets” in Gagauzia and the local media's politicization.⁵²

GRT's editorial policy appears to favour the regional authorities and avoid criticism of them. Its partiality was attested by journalist Oksana Chihaia in an interview with Amnesty International: “I was an editor-in-chief of GRT's website. In November 2023, after I published an article presenting an alternative opinion to that of the leading [political] figures of Gagauzia... regarding ... gas supplies to residents of the autonomous region ..., the company's management demanded that I delete the article. Subsequently, they made it impossible for me to perform my duties by subordinating me and the website's editorial team to the head of another GRT division, thereby censoring the website's editorial work. Moreover, I heard rumours that in January 2024 my position was going to be disestablished. So, I decided that I could no longer continue working in this company under constant censorship, and resigned voluntarily”.⁵³

The Chairman of WatchDog.MD, Valeriu Paşa,⁵⁴ told Amnesty International that pro-European media are subjected to bullying in Gagauzia. He also said that media in Gagauzia widely retransmit Russian TV channels, which is prohibited by the Audio-Visual Council of the Republic of Moldova, thereby violating national media regulations.

⁵⁰ Общественная вещательная компания «Gagauziya Radio Televizionu» (GRT), *Отчет наблюдательного совета и руководства компании за 2022 год*, reviewed by the Supervisory Board and adopted on 7 March 2023, p.37 <https://grt.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/otchet-grt-2022-god-got.pdf> (accessed 11 November 2025).

⁵¹ Общественная вещательная компания «Gagauziya Radio Televizionu» (GRT), *Положение о деятельности Наблюдательного совета ОБК ГРТ*, March 2023: <https://grt.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/polozenie-o-deyatelnosti-ns-ovk-grt.pdf> (accessed 11 November 2025).

⁵² Freedom House, *Restrictions on Freedom of Speech in Gagauzia: Threats to Democracy and Safety*, MEDIA-M policy brief no. 20, June 2024, p.1 https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/FH-Restrictions-on-freedom-of-speech-in-Gagauzia_Eng-06-24.pdf (accessed 11 November 2025).

⁵³ Interview via video call with Oksana Chihaia, September 2024.

⁵⁴ Interview via video call with Valeriu Paşa, 9 September 2024.

Daniela Vidaicu, Executive Director of the Soros Foundation Moldova, told Amnesty International that the subject of EU integration—a central government priority, reaffirmed by the 2024 national referendum but opposed by the autonomous Gagauz authorities backed by pro-Russian proxies—is extremely “politicized” in Gagauzia, and that media outlets presenting pro-European narratives face “high risks of harassment, hate speech and online attacks” when reporting on EU integration.⁵⁵

There are very few media outlets that are independent of the local authorities in their editorial policy and dare to openly criticize them. In his report Vitali Gaidarji quotes media expert Victor Gotișan who claims there are just two “media outlets that are engaged in independent and quality journalism,” Nokta.md and Laf.md. Both are online-based, and both according to the report are subjected to harassment.

Local journalists shared with Amnesty International that they have faced harassments for challenging the Gagauz authorities, in their reporting.

Amnesty International has interviewed representatives of Nokta.md, an outlet funded by foreign grants. Journalists believe that their investigative reporting and critical analyses of both local and national authorities, resulted in openly clashing with the Bașkan and other local authorities. “The Bașkan and her office, during a public appearance, called on the public to ‘spit in the face’ of a Nokta journalist. On a different occasion, there were offensive comments about a journalist’s appearance” – a Nokta.md journalist told Amnesty International.⁵⁶

Nokta.md’s Chief Editor, Mihail Sirkeli, on 3 April 2025 shared on his Facebook page that he was being subjected to a “flood attack” on his email, Telegram channel and mobile phone, and had received a number of messages, including threats using obscene language: “Your car is parked and it will be [...] ruined.” This happened after Mihail Sirkeli publicly supported an investigative journalist from Ziarul de Gardă who had criticized the former Bașkan, an influential person in Gagauzia and one closely affiliated with the current authorities.

Other journalists from Nokta.md have faced harassment, smear by political figures, and threats, some of which were reported to law enforcement agencies. Nokta.md’s website has also experienced cyberattacks.⁵⁷

In February 2024, a draft law was presented by the Executive Committee of Gagauzia which, if adopted, would require online media operating in the region to obtain registration with the local council. This legislative proposal provoked strong public opposition and has not been adopted at the time of writing.

In June 2024, the People’s Assembly of Gagauzia approved amendments to the local legislation that established a new licensing procedure for audiovisual media in the region. This initiative introduced a permit system, known as “Izin,” issued by the General Directorate of Construction and Infrastructure of Gagauzia, to authorize local TV and radio broadcasting. Moldovan media watchdogs and journalists argue this move circumvents the Audio-Visual Council of Moldova, the sole authority authorized to grant broadcasting licenses under Moldova’s Audiovisual Media Services Code.⁵⁸ Its sole purpose appears to create an additional barrier to media freedom in Gagauzia.

⁵⁵ Interview via video call with Daniela Vidaicu, 13 September 2024.

⁵⁶ Interview via video call, 2 May 2024.

⁵⁷ Nokta.md., Ataka na zhurnalistov nokta. md | Nokta Live korotko [Video file], 28 February 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tw5Rk9OEEYE> (accessed 11 November 2025).

⁵⁸ Independent Journalism Center (IJC), “Media NGOs condemn repeated attempts by Gagauzia authorities to undermine press freedom and demand immediate withdrawal of the legislative initiative,” 18 April 2024, <https://cji.md/en/ong-urile-de-media-condamna-tentativele-repetate-ale-autoritatilor-gagauziei-de-a-submina-libertatea-presei-si-cer-retragerea-imediata-a-initiativei-legislative/> (accessed 11 November 2025).

6. TRANSNISTRIA

The de facto authorities of the break-away region of Transnistria call it “Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic,”⁵⁹ a name which emphasizes the Russian spelling of the country’s name (“Moldavia”) and the region’s colonial past. More than just the name, at present the region is highly dependent on and effectively controlled by Russia politically, militarily and economically.

The region’s media space is equally defined by its dependence on Russia, and is marked by the de facto authorities’ control, and by severe restrictions of the right to freedom of expression. The media almost exclusively use the Russian language, although the de facto constitution grants equal status of “official languages” to “Moldavian” (the Russian reference to the Romanian language used in Moldova), Russian and Ukrainian.

The numerous undue restrictions on the right to freedom of expression are manifested in several ways, including in the region’s de facto criminal law (much of which resembles the Russian criminal law). According to the so-called criminal code of the “Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic,” publicly insulting the region’s “officials” is a crime punishable by a heavy fine or compulsory labour, whereas publicly insulting the “president” may lead to a five-year imprisonment. Criticism of the Russian armed forces (statements or actions which “express manifest disrespect towards the peacekeeping mission of the Russian Federation” or “distort... [its] positive peace-making role” or “lessen [its] good services”) is also a criminal offence punishable by up to three years’ imprisonment. So is “insulting the memory of the Great Patriotic War”, and “rehabilitation of Nazism” which includes “dissemination of deliberately false information about the activities of the USSR during World War II.” The latter is particularly pertinent for Moldova most of which, as then part of Romania, was occupied by the Red Army and annexed by the USSR during World War II, in 1940, as a result of its secret pact with Germany (Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact). The language of “the Great Patriotic War” was the name introduced in the Soviet Union to delineate the part of World War II during which the USSR was fighting against the Nazi Germany, and expressly after it was effectively acting in alliance with it, including by attacking and co-occupying Poland in 1939, and also occupying Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in 1940. Effectively, discussing Moldova’s history and present is a crime in Transnistria unless it conforms the Soviet/de facto authorities’/official Russian narrative which, in itself, censors history and defies international law.

There are direct, severe restrictions on media work in Transnistria. Authorities maintain strict oversight of public media, and critical reporting can lead to reprisals, including criminal prosecution. The government also employs bureaucratic hurdles and restricts access to information to suppress independent journalism. There is legislation in place that gives the authorities control over state media, granting officials the authority to appoint editorial personnel, restrict media coverage of official activities, and prohibit the use of recording equipment.⁶⁰

The region’s “official” broadcasting corporation, Pridnestrovskaya Gosudarstvennaya Teleradiokompaniya (“Pridnestrovian State Teleradiocompany”), runs the Perviy Pridniestrovskiy TV channel, Radio 1, and Novosti Pridniestroviya news agency. The vast majority of their content is produced in Russian. Their chief editors are directly nominated by the region’s “government” and approved by the “Supreme Council” (de facto legislature).

⁵⁹ This exact wording in English is used by the de facto authorities, eg see one of the “ministries” official website: Accreditation of Foreign Mass Media Representatives in the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic - Министерство цифрового развития, связи и массовых коммуникаций Приднестровской Молдавской Республики, available at: <https://mincifra.gospmr.org/деятельность/сми/accreditation-of-foreign-mass-media-representatives-in-the-pridnestrovian-moldavian-republic/> (accessed 11 November 2025).

⁶⁰ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2023: Transnistria*, Not Free (18/100), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/transnistria/freedom-world/2023> (accessed 11 November 2025).

The website of the de facto Ministry of Digital Development and Communications requires that any “foreign” media representative or independent individual journalist obtain its accreditation.⁶¹ Media and journalists from the government-controlled territory of Moldova are regarded as “foreign,” and are thus prevented from working freely in Transnistria. Any attempt to provide a critical insight into life in the region is promptly terminated.

Journalist Irina Tabaranu, from the online news platform Zona de Securitate which reports about events in Transnistria, told Amnesty International that journalists who do not report pro-Transnistrian or pro-Russian views cannot work freely in Transnistria. She stated that the de facto authorities in Transnistria have an unofficial list of “undesirable persons”, and that she herself is included in it. According to Irina, people included in the list can be prevented from entering Transnistria in case their documents are checked by de-facto police or border guards. She also stated that on rare occasions journalists from her media are able to report on some events from Transnistria, such as the start of the school year, however, they are followed by Transnistrian services operatives or police and cannot report on anything other than the “allowed and authorized subject.” There are also serious concerns about the safety of those whom journalists may interview. “There is no free media in Transnistria. Journalists are followed by security forces, the risk of detention is extremely high, and no one can guarantee your safety or help you if anything is to happen to you, she said.”⁶² As a result, few journalists from government-controlled Moldova attempt to visit and report from Transnistria.

In January 2024, TV8 reporter Viorica Tătaru and Andrei Captarenco, the cameraman who accompanied her, were prevented from covering a protest in Transnistria and interviewing its participants. She told Amnesty International that they arrived in Transnistria by a regular bus. After seven minutes of attending the protest, they were approached by four men in civilian clothes who asked Viorica Tătaru and her colleague in aggressive tone: “Who sent you here? Who is paying you to do this?” The men demanded that Viorica Tătaru write down all the questions she was asking the protesters. After that, the journalists were told to get in the car with the four men to be taken to the so-called State Security Ministry in Transnistria (MGB). Viorica Tătaru refused to get into their car and insisted on walking. She, her colleague and the four men walked to the ministry headquarters, where Viorica Tătaru and the cameraman were taken to different rooms and questioned. Their questioning lasted around two hours. They were given no formal reasons for their detention, and no documents were presented to the journalists. After the questioning, Viorica Tătaru and her colleague were told to delete all the material they had filmed, and they were transferred in a police car to the region’s administrative boundary line separating it from the rest of Moldova and forced to cross into government-controlled territory. “If something happens to you in Transnistria, Moldovan police cannot help you as they are not in control of this territory.” She added that during her questioning, which she called “interrogation,” she feared that “something bad” could happen, but in the event, they were able to return to the government-controlled territory safely.⁶³

The de facto Transnistrian authorities pursue the same approach in the neutral zone, over which they do not have sole control. This narrow stretch of territory which roughly follows the river Nistru (Dniester) and separates the government-controlled and the break-away territories, is variously known as “the Security Zone” and “Demilitarized Buffer Zone.” It was established in 1992 under the agreements which achieved the ceasefire, and is concurrently patrolled by the Moldovan, Russian and de facto Transnistrian forces.

Studio L is a local TV channel from Căușeni (government-controlled territory of Moldova) which focuses on events in settlements located in the neutral zone. On 15 November 2024, two journalists

⁶¹ Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media (Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic), “Accreditation of Foreign Mass Media Representatives in the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic,” <https://mincifra.gospmr.org/деятельность/сми/accreditation-of-foreign-mass-media-representatives-in-the-pridnestrovian-moldavian-republic/> (accessed 11 November 2025).

⁶² Interview via video call with Irina Tabaranu, 12 September 2024.

⁶³ In person interview with Viorica Tătaru, Chisinau, 2 May 2024.

from Studio L, Octavian Lupăcescu and his colleague Ion Moroz, a Ukrainian national, were stopped by four men while driving in the zone in a car. “We were not even trying to get into Transnistria as this is a lawless area. We would not know what to expect while working there,” said Octavian Lupăcescu in an interview with Amnesty International. Their plan was to film a news report from one of the villages in the zone. The men who detained them claimed to be from the de facto Transnistrian border guards and customs service. They checked the journalists’ documents, searched their car, and asked about each piece of their filming equipment. After the search, one of the men got into their car and, escorted by a military vehicle, they were forced to drive to the break-away region’s capital Tiraspol. Upon arrival at the de facto General Customs Department, the journalists had their mobile phones taken and checked in front of them and then locked away. The two journalists were separated for questioning. “We were in there for a few hours, never left alone,” said Octavian Lupăcescu. At the end, the journalists were told to write down “explanations” about the circumstances of their detention, fined 200 Transnistrian Rubles for “illegally crossing the border of Transnistria” and escorted to the government-controlled territory. All the footage was deleted from all of their devices. Octavian Lupăcescu believes that they were lucky to have been released quickly, largely due to their colleagues’ having promptly started looking for them and sharing the information about their disappearance in the neutral zone on social media and raising public alarm.⁶⁴

Such detention of journalists by the de facto authorities of Transnistria is unlawful, as is their search, their questioning and the destruction of their recordings, and their forcible removal into government-controlled territory. It is part of the broader pattern of harassment and intimidation of independent media in Transnistria, and of the de facto authorities’ crackdown on freedom of expression. No one is held accountable for such practices, and no one likely will as long as the region remains under effective Russian control and emulates its legislation and its restrictive practices.

7. CONCLUSION

The right to freedom of expression is protected by international and regional human rights law and includes the freedom to hold opinions, and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority. This right is not absolute and may be legitimately restricted to protect one of the legitimate aims expressly established in the applicable human rights instruments which include the protection of national security, public safety, or the rights of others. Additionally, any such restrictions must be assessed on a case-by-case basis, to be prescribed by law, and be necessary, and proportionate to achieve their stated aims.

The Moldovan government’s response to security threats emanating from Russia, particularly following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, may be driven by legitimate concerns, but many of the restrictive measures it has taken in the media sphere have raised serious questions about legality, necessity, and proportionality. The new legislation passed lacked legal clarity, was introduced in a questionable manner, and its overbroad application and insufficient safeguards against its abuse raise real concerns. These concerns have indeed transpired as a result of the numerous instances of suspension of broadcasting licenses of media outlets that pursued editorial policies dissenting from the government’s priorities and narratives. Even among the media sympathetic to the government’s stated intention to pursue national security agenda in the media sphere, these measures and the way they have been implemented, have come across as arbitrary. These measures have contributed to the media’s overall vulnerability and the climate of uncertainty. They encourage the practice of self-censorship and put Moldova’s media pluralism at risk.

At the same time, the government is seen as failing to protect journalists from harassment and threats, and unable to enforce national laws, regulations and standards uniformly across the entire

⁶⁴ Interview via a video call with Octavian Lupăcescu and Igor Moroz, November 2024.

government-controlled territory of Moldova, particularly in the autonomous Gagauzia territory, and to prevent abuse of the media for political purpose or to the detriment of national security. The failure to provide and enforce clear legal safeguards to protect media from undue state interferences, ensure editorial independence, and provide adequate protection from attacks and harassment of individual journalists and media outlets, fosters an environment in which self-censorship, intimidation, and abuses thrive.

In the territory outside government control, in Transnistria, where the de facto authorities operate with the backing of Russian military forces and under practices and laws copied from Russia, the exercise of the right to freedom of expression, including media freedom, is virtually non-existent. Independent journalism and free expression are suppressed, and criticism of the de facto authorities and of the Russian involvement, past and present, is criminalized.

The authorities of Moldova must ensure that its media regulation is transparent and fully in line with the country's international human rights obligations. Journalists—whether in Chisinau, Comrat, or Tiraspol—must be able to work without fear, free from pressure and interference.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 TO THE GOVERNMENT OF MOLDOVA:

- Revise and bring national legislation and practice which regulates the right to freedom of expression, media operations and content, including that which is intended to combat disinformation and protect national security, into full compliance with Moldova's obligations under international human rights law and standards. And in particular:
 - Ensure legislation fully complies with the principle of legality, and that any restrictions are accessible, foreseeable as to their effects and provide sufficient precision, including in the definitions of the terms used, so that it precludes their arbitrary application and abuse of the legislation for political or other purposes;
 - Refrain from and prevent the use of exceptional measures and restrictions without due process, and review and revert such measures implemented under the state of emergency against the media;
 - Ensure that any decision to restrict any media outlet, such as suspension of licenses, is subject to prior independent and impartial judicial review with full access to legal remedies for affected parties.
- Reinforce the autonomy, accountability, and transparency of the national media regulator (Audio-Visual Council), and ensure that it is free from political influence by government's executive bodies.
- Carry out prompt, effective, impartial and independent investigations of every instance of threats, intimidation, harassment and violence against media workers, including online harassment, and ensure that any person reasonably suspected of responsibility is brought to justice in fair trial proceedings.
- Guarantee the safety and security of media workers, including by providing them with adequate holistic protection in accordance with their needs and wishes and incorporating a gender and intersectional approach, especially for those covering sensitive topics or working in high-risk areas.
- In consultation with the professional media community and competent civil society organizations, develop a national plan and a roadmap for supporting media pluralism (including linguistic, cultural, political and other) and independent journalism, including by devising new funding opportunities and transparent funding schemes, training, and capacity-building programs that prioritize editorial freedom.

8.2 TO THE AUTHORITIES OF GAGAUZIA:

- Bring the regional media regulatory framework and practices, including licensing procedures, into full compliance with Moldova's international human rights obligations
- Ensure and safeguard editorial independence at Gagauziya Radio Televizionu (GRT), including by protecting it and its governing bodies from undue political or other influence, including via its leadership appointment mechanisms.
- Ensure that media workers, including those working for outlets that are critical of the authorities, are free to perform their professional duties without threats, harassment, cyberattacks or any form of violence.
- Condemn any calls for violence or public harassment against them and take all necessary steps to ensure prompt, effective, impartial and independent investigations of every instance of threats, intimidation, harassment and violence against media workers, including online harassment, and ensure that those suspected of responsibility are brought to justice in fair trial proceedings.

8.3 TO RUSSIA AS THE OCCUPYING POWER AND THE DE FACTO AUTHORITIES IN TRANSNISTRIA:

- Fully respect the right to freedom of expression as well as all other human rights of every person in the territory under their control. Immediately cease any policies and practices that unduly restrict the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom of the press and the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds regardless of frontiers, as well as criticism of members of the de facto authorities and of the Russian forces, in line with international human rights law and standards.
- Allow Moldovan and foreign journalists to operate freely in the region without harassment, detention, surveillance or any other form of retaliation.

8.4 TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY, INCLUDING THE EUROPEAN UNION:

- Ensure that financial and technical assistance to Moldova contributes to media freedom and protection of human rights, while ensuring that it does not contribute to any discriminatory or other abusive practices.
- Engage with the Moldovan professional media community and competent civil society organizations to discuss and support funding strategy for Moldovan media, including the most efficient and fair ways of supporting independent, investigative, and local-language media, particularly in underrepresented regions including Gagauzia and Transnistria, and supporting communities vulnerable to disinformation, misinformation and discrimination.
- Offer technical assistance and training to Moldova's media regulators, legislators, members of its media community, and civil society actors, on human rights-compliant standards of journalism, combating disinformation and misinformation, and international best practice regarding safeguarding free expression.
- Using all appropriate foreign policy tools, undertake regular assessments and public reporting on media freedom, and freedom of expression more generally, in Moldova, including in the break-away Transnistria, and engage with the government of Moldova and other stakeholders to address the issues identified and reported.

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