



# **ONE YEAR LATER:**

## Online Discourse in Moldova about Ukrainian Refugees



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# Executive Summary

This report presents an analysis of social listening to monitor sentiments and perspectives shared by Moldovan social media users about Ukrainian refugees and the wider refugee response. The timing of this social listening enabled an assessment of the temperature of the information ecosystem at a critical moment in Moldova, timed to monitor perspectives shared in online spaces over the one-year anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the consequent influx of refugees in Moldova. Monitoring included nine platforms (see methodology) and the collection of 324 examples of online comments that include hate speech, prejudice, spreading of misinformation and links to known disinformation campaigns in private and open groups pages and discussions. Data was collected in Russian, Romanian, Ukrainian and English.

The monitoring specifically looked for rumours, mis- and disinformation<sup>1</sup>, and issues of prejudice, hate speech and social tensions. It also sought to capture harmful discourse that could impact refu-

gee services or pose a risk to refugees or aid workers and volunteers. It is important to note that the scope of this project was to listen and to understand negative sentiments expressed in online spaces at a critical juncture in this conflict.

This report does not aim to assess all sentiments expressed online by Moldovan social media users and equally it does not suggest that the majority of sentiments expressed on social media platforms about Ukrainian refugees are negative. Rather, it is likely that this content represents a vocal minority, but one that contributes to social tensions between the refugee and host communities. As this project aimed to understand harmful discourse, we did not capture the many positive and supportive comments online related to refugees and the refugee response overall. Because of this defined scope, this report could be misinterpreted to be suggesting that harmful content dominates online opinion. This is not the case. Wider research would be required to capture a broader scope of content

over time and undertake comprehensive sentiment analysis to determine what percentage of social media posts are indeed negative.

Based on analysis of data posted online between 1<sup>st</sup> January to 20<sup>th</sup> March 2023, key findings were:

- 88 per cent of data linked to social tensions collected in this research was Russian language data, while 11 per cent Romanian language. Gaps exist in understanding preferred languages for online / social media communication in Moldova, so it is not currently clear to what degree the language split of this research is proportionate to Moldovan's language use (between Russian and Romanian) online.
- The data indicates significant uptake and circulation of disinformation campaigns in Moldova about Ukrainian refugees (linked to disinformation more widely about the war and geo-political tensions), with 23 per cent of data collected indicating presence of disinformation narratives about Ukrainian refugees.
- 26 per cent of data indicate spread of misinformation, particularly related to a prevailing sentiment amongst some Moldovan groups that Ukrainian refugees are being supported to the detriment of Moldovans. Animosity was particularly targeted towards cash payments available to refugees, especially alongside dominant perception that Ukrainians are wealthy.
- Certain situations and media coverage trigger negative sentiments, including Ukrainian refugees' involvement in protests, rumoured terrorist activity and insurgency, use of Ukrainian language and Ukrainians appearing to flaunt wealth.
- Narratives counter to the rights of refugees are present amongst some groups, with 15 per cent

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<sup>1</sup> Misinformation refers to false information shared by individuals who believe it is accurate and spread it without malicious intent, while disinformation refers to false information disseminated with malicious intent (more details in Key Terms section of the report).

of data indicating negative sentiments, dismissal or rejection of refugee rights, including non-refoulement.<sup>2</sup>

- Overall, there is a strong sense of burden on Moldovans, a tension linked with the tendency to revert to prejudiced and derogatory statements and generalisations about Ukrainian refugees. Fear is evidently driving angry and violent online responses that position Ukrainian refugees as complicit in destabilisation efforts and increasing inequality.

This report is designed to complement other recent publications produced by Internews, including a [Information Ecosystem Assessment](#) in Moldova which aims to understand information preferences, gaps and barriers for refugees and host community and a recent report on digital risks present for Ukrainian refugees in the Moldovan digital information space.

We hope that this research complements wider social listening efforts to form a better understanding of social tensions, misinformation, and disinformation in Moldovan and Ukrainian refugee communities.

*WARNING: Content and quotes in this report contain language and sentiments that may offend some readers. This social media data represented in this report is presented for research purposes only and it does not represent the views of Internews, IOM or USAID PRM.*

## INTRODUCTION

Since the invasion on 24 February 2022, more than 900,000 Ukrainian citizens and more than 1 million third-country nationals (TCNs) have entered Moldova<sup>3</sup>. As of 12 March 2023, 107,277 Ukrainian refugees were recorded in Moldova.<sup>4</sup> The Russian invasion of Ukraine has exacerbated inequalities and poverty in Moldova, which is the 4<sup>th</sup> poorest country in Europe by GDP per capita.<sup>5</sup> The impact on the average Moldovan person is significant, with increased inflation, energy costs and an overburdened health system.<sup>6</sup>

A [recent Information Ecosystem Assessment](#) conducted by Internews identified rising social tensions between refugees and citizens in Moldova. While this may not reflect the experiences of every Ukrainian and Moldovan, it highlights a concerning trend that deserves attention. Refugees reported hostile attitudes from some members of the host community, concerns for personal security, reluctance to contact local authorities in an emergency, and hesitations to publicly identify themselves as Ukrainian including using Ukrainian language in public. Misinformation about funding sources for the refugee response, decisions around aid distribution and rising economic pressures in Moldova further contribute to these divisions. Amidst uncer-

tainty about prospects for Ukrainian refugees and TCNs to return to Ukraine, inclusion initiatives have become more central to refugees' needs, particularly with the implementation of Temporary Protection Status (TPS) for Ukrainian refugees in March 2023.<sup>7</sup>

Shared language dynamics and close territorial histories are studied in this research to give broader context to social tensions, to understand historic and current levels of integration and dialogue Moldovans and Ukrainians. According to a public opinion poll conducted in Ukraine in October 2022<sup>8</sup>, 15 per cent of Ukrainians visited Moldova before February 24, 2022, and 50 per cent of Moldovans visited Ukraine. Interestingly, more than 70 per cent of Moldovans assessed their attitude towards Ukrainians as positive or very positive before February 24, 2022. Following the start of Russian full-scale invasion this number decreased but still remains high, at over 60 per cent<sup>9</sup>. However, in a November 2022 survey, when asked, 'who do you think is right in the Russia Ukraine conflict?' more than 20% of respondents believe that Russia is in the right, with a further 26 per cent undecided. In addition to matters central to the refugee population and response, Moldova has faced political turmoil and

<sup>2</sup> Returning refugees to a country in which they would be in likely danger of persecution based on "race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" (OHCHR)

<sup>3</sup> Republic of Moldova — [Displacement Data Analysis on TCNs, Round # 15](#) (as of 05 Feb 2023)

<sup>4</sup> [UNHCR Operational Data Portal, Moldova](#)

<sup>5</sup> [The World Bank, 2021](#)

<sup>6</sup> REACH, 2023. Report: The impact of cost-of-living changes on Moldovan and refugee populations

<sup>7</sup> [Internews Information Ecosystem Assessment](#) - Floods and deserts: information access and barriers in Moldova's refugee response, March 2023

<sup>8</sup> [Analysis of the bilateral Ukraine-Moldova relations: problematic and promising dimensions of cooperation](#), Ukrainian PRISM Foreign Policy Council, October 2022

<sup>9</sup> [Public Opinion Barometer sociological survey, November 2022](#)

upheaval, in some ways linked to a history of geo-political tensions involving Russia. Public protests have occurred in February and March, some of which – though not always directly related to the invasion of Ukraine and Russia – inevitably garner commentary that has drawn out polarizations and social tensions involving Ukrainians.

Refugees and host communities face challenges when it comes to navigating available information about a refugee crisis and response, especially when everything in their lives has been upended. When misinformation, disinformation, prejudices, and social tensions exacerbate challenges and impact communication, humanitarian agencies and government services need to understand the narratives circulating and pay attention to how they will impact communities. Within this context Internews has undertaken targeted, qualitative monitoring of online spaces frequented by Moldovan people, to listen to discussions and comments about Ukrainian refugees and related matters. The objective of this monitoring and research is to form an increased understanding of rumours and misperceptions, instances of hate speech and disinformation campaigns targeting Ukrainian refugees or the refugee response overall, which will enable humanitarian agencies and media to be sensitive to these dynamics in communication and adapt responses accordingly.

Between 20 February and 20 March, 2023, Internews local researchers (based in Chişinău) collected 324 online comments across 9 social media platforms. The following analysis provides an overview of those findings, with acknowledgement that this monitoring captured a relatively small and targeted sample that was sought out specifically for negative discourse and therefore does not intend to represent the opinions of all social media users in Moldova. This research complements ongoing rumour tracking and social listening undertaken by Moldova for Peace as part of Accountability to Affected Peoples efforts in the wider refugee response in Moldova, to form a better understanding of social tensions, misinformation, and disinformation in communities.

## ABOUT INTERNEWS

[Internews](#) is a thought leader in the field of Community Engagement and Accountability and information access in complex contexts. We believe everyone deserves trustworthy news and information to make informed decisions about their lives and hold power to account. In nearly two decades on the front lines of humanitarian crises, Internews has seen the risks some communities must take to access vital information and how poor access can increase exposure to risks for crisis affected communities.

As a founding member of the [Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities \(CDAC\)](#) Network, we have contributed to the growing acceptance of information and communication as aid, advocating for communities affected by crisis to be able to make better-informed decisions, have safe access to life-saving information and have active participation in humanitarian programming cycles. We have been working on misinformation in a humanitarian context, developed manuals, and shared our expertise training other humanitarian agencies on how to collect, categorise and analyse mis- and disinformation as a way to increase contextual awareness and improve understanding of the needs and concerns of people affected by crisis.

Internews is an international non-profit with 30 offices around the world, including headquarters in California, Washington DC, London and Paris, and regional hubs in Bangkok, Kyiv, and Nairobi. Internews is registered as a 501(c)3 non-profit in California, EIN 94-3027961, in England and Wales as a Charity no. 1148404 and Company no. 7891107 and in France as Non-Profit Association SIRET no. 425 132 347 000 13.

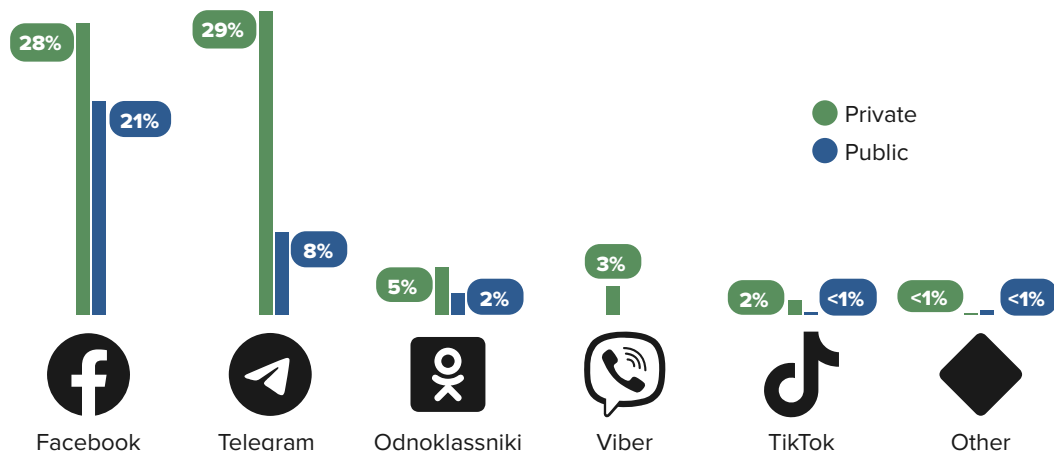
## METHODOLOGY

This research uses the Internews humanitarian misinformation management methodology to guide investigation into a ‘snap-shot in time’ of online discourse within Moldovan communities. Qualitative data collection was conducted manually by two local researchers based in Chişinău, monitoring Russian, Romanian, Ukrainian and English language content. The methodology emphasizes a manual, qualitative social listening approach in order to capture a deeper contextual understanding of the content, capturing the nuance between humour, satire and hate speech.

The monitoring specifically looked for rumours, mis- and disinformation, and issues of prejudice, hate speech and social tensions as well as potential campaigns by malicious information actors. It also sought to capture harmful discourse that could impact refugee services or pose a risk to refugees or aid workers and volunteers. Given the scope and timing of this research, relevant data was linked to already identified disinformation narratives (identified in desk research and based on the researcher’s expertise) as opposed to seeking to define and trace the origin to confirm disinformation more generally. This is aligned with Internews’ usual research and social listening approach, which emphasises analysis of the potential impact of content on people and in the information ecosystem, and an understanding of the underlying belief structures that contribute to spread rather than on attempting to trace disinformation.

This project is subject to ethical and data responsibility considerations related to the collection and analysis of online data. Internews ensures that data

### PUBLIC AND PRIVATE GROUPS DATA BY PLATFORMS



collected does not infringe on the privacy of individuals, and that any links to social media posts identifying people are stored in password protected data log and are deleted following the end of the project period. Data will be fully anonymized before it is shared with partners and networks.

Internews identified relevant channels to monitor through our established Social Media Influence Mapping methodology. The approach includes workshops with experts to identify the most relevant channels and platforms to monitor, notable accounts and influencers as well as key words and terms (in all relevant languages) that will assist the Researchers to collect relevant online content. Workshops were conducted with the Internews Moldova team and the Independent Journalism Centre, and IOM were also consulted for input.

Identification of key words and issues also formed a list of themes and sub-themes to guide data analysis. This process is also complemented by Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools such as [Talkwalker](#) and [Information Tracer](#) to guide network mapping and to get a sense of the spread and traction of certain discourses and themes.

Nine social media and messaging platforms formed the basis for data collection: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, WhatsApp, Odnoklassniki, VKontakte (Russian language platforms), Telegram, Viber. Researchers also used Talkwalker to aid in high-level monitoring of a broader range of platforms to guide them to platforms, pages and posts for further investigation. 68 per cent of data overall was manually collected from private groups, and 32 per cent collected from public channels.

The collected data was logged in original languages (88 per cent Russian, 11 per cent Romanian, 1 per cent English) and translated to English, with links and screenshots of the original content also recorded. Data was then analysed and coded for common themes and sub-themes within the scope of the project. Where possible, sex and age disaggregation were also captured (with the caveat that this data can be unreliable). Where available, geographic areas from which the content originated were also recorded, as well as any community ties clearly labelled against the group or page (for example, political ties, religious ties). Each line of data was ranked in terms of risk level (low, medium, high), to note the level of likely harm and the likelihood of believability and traction. High risk content is immediately escalated for review by the project manager, and where relevant humanitarian actors were informed. Finally, the sentiment of the data is assessed. Given the focus of this project, negative sentiment data was actively sought out, and to that end represented most data (93 per cent).

Researchers are trained and supported by Internews in the instance that psychosocial harm or stress is caused by the process of monitoring for this kind of data.

## LIMITATIONS/ SCOPE

This research faced key limitations, namely:

**Language:** 88 per cent of data collected in this research was Russian language data, 11 per cent Romanian language and 1 per cent English language. The recent Information Ecosystem Assessment conducted in Moldova by Internews indicates that 46 per cent of Moldovans surveyed speak Russian at home<sup>10</sup>, which indicates the prevalence of Russian data collected in this research may be disproportionate. The majority of TV media in Moldova is Russian language<sup>11</sup>, which may point to language tendencies in consuming and interacting with online media, but there is little analysis available on this. Gaps also exist in understanding preferred languages for online / social media communication in Moldova, so it is not currently clear to what degree the language split of this research is proportionate to Moldovan's language use (between Russian and Romanian) online.

**Representation of data from closed platforms:** While this research does include some data from closed platforms (including private groups and messaging applications), data from these sources is much more difficult to collect due to the nature of those platforms. However, research does suggest that closed platforms may also attract more misinformation and harmful content than public forums<sup>12</sup> and so it is likely that research focussed wholly on these spaces may uncover a different frequency and kind of harmful content.

**Duration of research:** As this research was designed to understand a snapshot in time, it was unable to compare this to other time periods to understand whether the information captured over the one-year anniversary of the beginning of the war was different to online discourse that could be captured in Moldova at any other time. While our hypothesis is that the one-year anniversary could contribute to greater media attention to the issue of refugees and therefore further spur online discussion, longer-term research is needed to confirm this point.

**Scope:** as mentioned above, this project aimed to understand harmful discourse, we did not capture the many positive and supportive comments online related to refugees and the refugee response overall. Because of this defined scope, this report could be misinterpreted to be suggesting that harmful content dominates online opinion. This is not the case. Wider research would be required to capture a broader scope of content over time and undertake comprehensive sentiment analysis to determine what percentage of social media posts are indeed negative.

**Disinformation campaigns and malicious activity:** This research did not have the scope to adequately trace the origin of every post collected and to determine definitively if the post originated as part of a malicious information campaign, from either a troll, bot or another information actor. Desk research was used to determine which disinformation narratives

<sup>10</sup> [Internews Information Ecosystem Assessment](#) - Floods and deserts: information access and barriers in Moldova's refugee response, March 2023

<sup>11</sup> USAID Digital Ecosystem Country Assessment, 2021

<sup>12</sup> [EU Disinfo Lab](#), 2021



had already been identified by other research and an initial assessment of each post and user profile was made to assess the veracity of the user profile. Disinformation actors are incredibly skilled at creating profiles that appear 'real', and so it is likely that some were not identified in our assessment.

Identifying a troll account on social media can be challenging, but we used the following measures as indications that an account may be falsified:

- **Provocative and controversial posts:** Troll accounts often post provocative and controversial content, seeking to incite strong emotional reactions and stir up arguments and conflict. Trolls often engage in online fights and arguments.
- **Inconsistent behaviour:** Trolls may switch between different personas or opinions, contradicting themselves to confuse or irritate others.
- **Lack of personal information:** Trolls often use anonymous or fake profiles that often have been established recently, have little or no personal information or contradicting information about the user, few friends or followers, and fake or obscure pictures.

It's also important to remember that not all controversial or provocative content is posted by trolls, and some legitimate users may display some of these behaviours.

## KEY TERMS AND THEMES:

### Data type categorisation:

*Belief / observations:* for the purposes of data categorisation, Internews defines data that expresses a statement based on something seen, heard or noticed, or indicates acceptance of something as true, as a belief or observation. This data type is used when there is no indication that the belief or observation includes false information or intends to spread untruth, however beliefs / observations do not necessarily cite 'proof'.

*Criticism / complaint:* Internews defines a criticism / complaint as an expression of disapproval of someone or something on the basis of perceived faults or mistakes (usually an institution in the context of Internews research or social listening), with the intent for the criticised entity to hear and record the criticism / complaint.

*Disinformation (data type):* False information that is fabricated and/or disseminated with malicious intent to deceive and mislead audiences and/or obscure the truth for the purposes of causing strategic, political, economic, social, or personal harm or financial/commercial gain.

*Misinformation:* False information that is shared by individuals who believe it's accurate and spread it without malicious intent.

### Themes used for categorisation:

*Disinformation (theme):* For the purposes of this research, disinformation as a theme refers specifically to suspected bot or troll activity (definitions below).

*Geo-political concerns:* for the purposes of this research, geo-political concerns refer to current and historic politics and international relations, as influenced by geographic factors. Specifically,

geo-political concerns in this research refers to political ties and tensions between Moldova, Russia, Ukraine, as well as 'the West' – a term referred to in this report due to its use in the collected community data – notably inclusive of the European Union and the United States.

*Hate speech and stigma:* Text, images, audio or video based on intolerance towards the traits like gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. and disseminated to spread, promote or justify hatred and violence. It also can trigger violence (or physical threat) against members of another identity-based group. Stigma refers to a strong feeling of disapproval that most people in a society have about something, especially when this is unfair. This category also includes general prejudice, which refers to unfair and unreasonable opinion or feeling, especially when formed without enough thought or knowledge.

*Media:* this theme category refers to data that includes a media component or direct reference to a published media report. For example, this could include misrepresentation of a certain group of people in the media, or comments from communities about media coverage.

*Refugee response:* this theme category captures data that references the Ukrainian refugee response in Moldova, or comments that can be linked or related to specific components of the response.

*Refugee rights:* this theme category captures data that references the rights of refugees, or that includes comments that could be understood to reject, counter or mislead regarding the rights of refugees, including the principle of non-refoulement<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> [UNHCR, 1951 refugee convention](#)

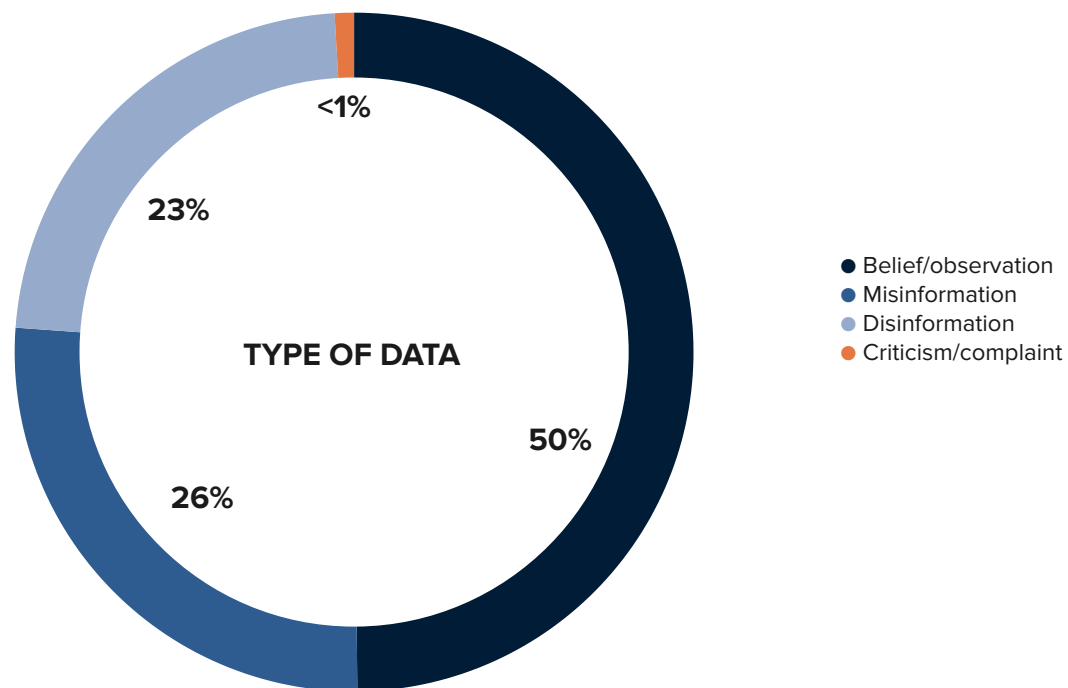


### Other terms:

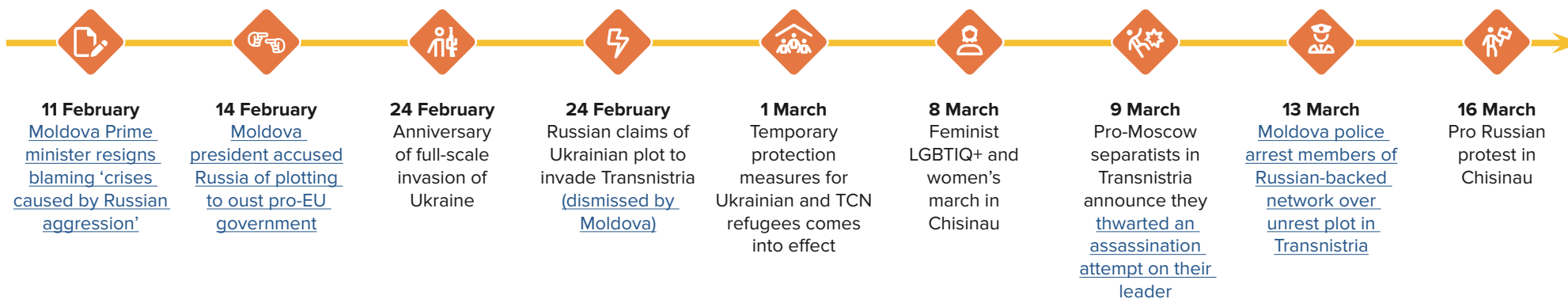
**Bots:** computer programs that are programmed to work automatically. They are sometimes used to mimic the accounts of social media users to post spam messages, misrepresent public sentiments or drive an agenda around sensitive issues.

**Troll:** an account that leaves annoying or offensive messages online with the intention to provoke arguments, upset or offend members of the community. A troll is different from a bot because a troll is a real user, whereas bots are automated.

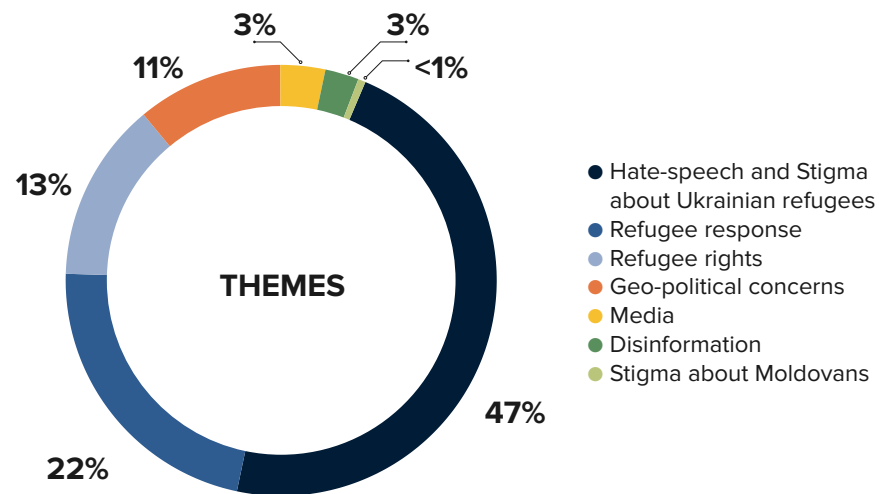
**Propaganda:** Often inaccurate or misleading information used to promote a particular point of view (usually a political cause), to influence a target audience in favour of certain actor.



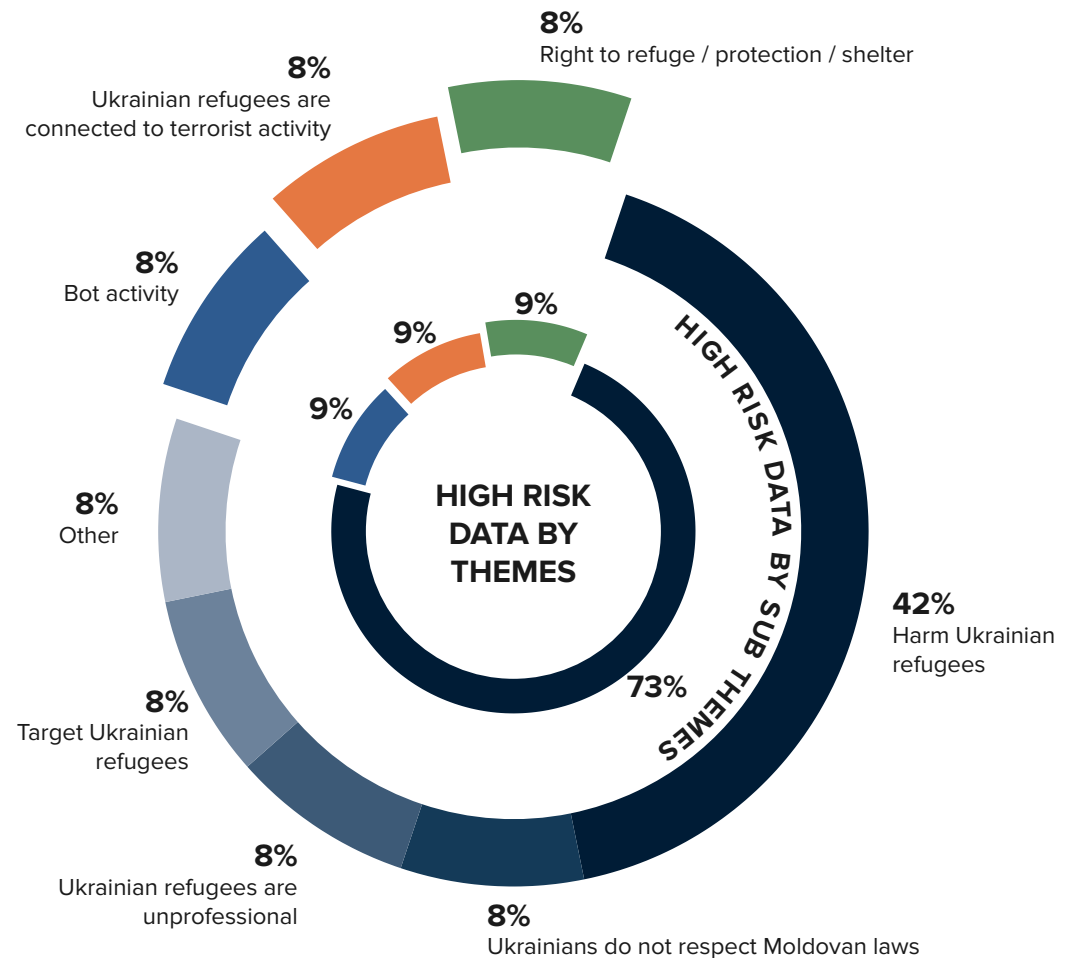
### Significant events during the monitoring period



# Findings and trends



50 per cent of the data collected was identified as some form of hate speech or stigma against Ukrainian refugees. Comments and sentiments relevant to the refugee response and services formed the next highest categorisation with 21 per cent of data, followed by geo-political concerns (12 per cent) and refugee rights (10.5 per cent). The remainder of data was formed of suspected bot activity, sentiments / prejudice about Moldovans and media commentary.



High-risk data is defined as data with a high threat of imminent harm towards individuals or a group and has high believability and traction. In this research 3 per cent of posts or comments were defined by researchers as high risk. Some violent and aggressive comments were identified and classified as medium-risk, due to the lack of traction and believability of the post or account. Medium risk data (18 per cent) and low risk data (79 per cent) are still relevant to note, as these can inform us about harmful sentiments that represent a concerning but less immediate threat to the community and relief workers.

In addition to categorising data under themes and sub-themes, researchers identified a 'Data Type' to track where particular sentiments and themes aligned with known disinformation campaigns, instances of misinformation that have gained traction and general beliefs and opinions. A small portion of data was classified as a criticism or complaint, as they were negative sentiments that included a suggestion relevant to a particular entity (government / humanitarian agency – more details throughout the report).

## HATE SPEECH AND PREJUDICE

Hate speech and prejudicial comments formed 47 per cent of the overall data collected and 52 per cent of data identified as high and medium risk. Derogatory language was collected from 151 posts and was often associated with sentiments to send refugees back to Ukraine, suggestions that Ukrainians are trying to take advantage of Moldovans, that Ukrainian refugees are entitled, and the belief that Ukrainian refugees are the cause of economic and security destabilisation in Moldovan society.

Derogatory terms identified in the research:

- Nazi, Ukronazi, Ukrofascist, Fascist / other terms referring to fascists – found in 18 per cent of data
- *Khokhol* – a derogatory Russian language term for Ukrainians – found in 11 per cent of data
- References to Ukrainian people as terrorists – found in 5 per cent of data
- *Pig* – found in 3 per cent of posts (including reference to 'pigs on the table' – which refers to ingratitude (a pig on the table does not say thank you and makes a mess of everything)
- Other derogatory terms such as scum, barbarians, whore, bitches, freaks and fagot (sic) were found in 5 per cent of data

*"How I hate them! They spread like a plague throughout the earth. Miserable, miserable, worthless, it's sickening to look at you, it's disgusting to read. Soon, all over the planet you will be driven and beaten, like shabby jackals, I can't stand you."*

Gender unknown, Telegram group 'Republic of Gagauzia', Russian language

*"Khokhols are traitors, sluts of the Jewish Saxons."*

Telegram group 'Republic of Gagauzia', Russian language

*"The Nazis do not know how to create, only destruction, chaos and decay."*

Telegram group 'Republic of Gagauzia', Russian language

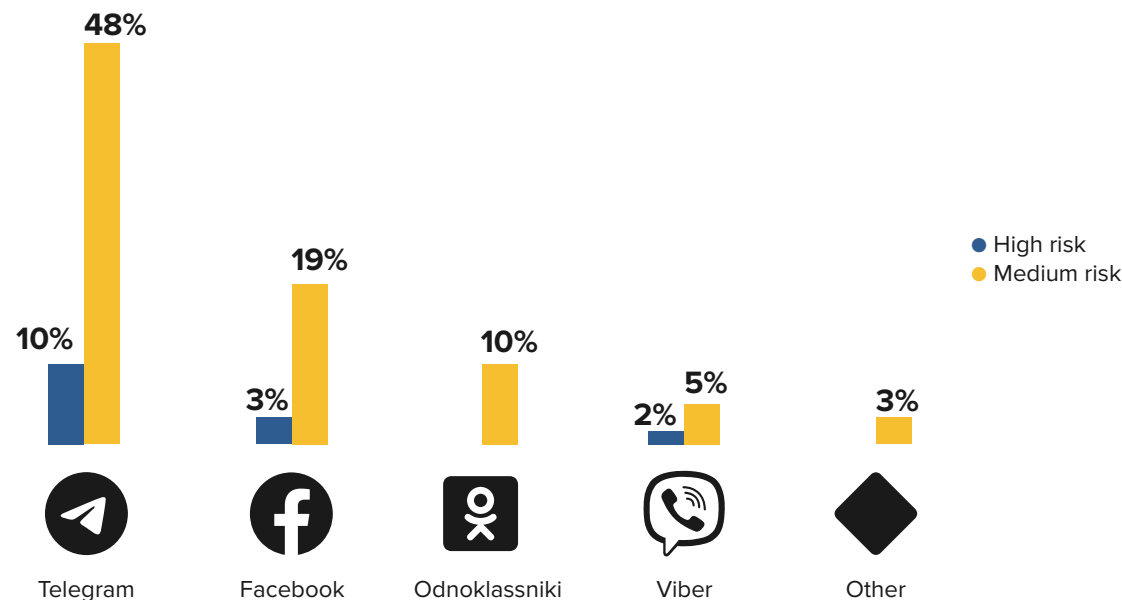
*"Do not touch Moldova! Barbarians are not invited here!"*

Female, Facebook group 'Komsomol Truth in Moldova', Russian language

Specific derogatory language and sentiments were used to describe the current Presidents of Ukraine (President Volodymyr Zelenskyy) and Moldova (President Maia Sandu). Though these occurred in a relatively small number of posts, the sentiments are of note: President Zelenskyy was referred to as a 'clown' in multiple posts, and in one post President Sandu's birth origin and nationality is questioned. Both Presidents are seen to be aligned with "the West".

The most concerning high and medium-risk data included comments targeting Ukrainian refugees with violence or abuse (66 per cent of high-risk data and 26 per cent of medium-risk data) or with assertions refugees should be sent back to Ukraine. The majority of high-risk data was collected on Tele-

## HIGH AND MEDIUM RISK DATA BY PLATFORMS



gram (67 per cent), following by Facebook (22 per cent) and Viber (11 per cent). Telegram has emerged as a popular platform for right wing and extremist groups, with the anonymity offered potentially encouraging or permitting sharing of more extremist comments<sup>14</sup>, and research has also shown that group polarization occurs in smaller, closed spaces<sup>15</sup>. Though this research did not record significant traction on high-risk comments on Telegram, the nature of private groups and profiles meant it was not possible to track how often and how widely the user may have been sharing similar sentiments.



*"I will come home, and I will beat and poison every khohol creature, even bastard children. Khohols are enemies."*

Gender unknown, Telegram group 'Republic of Gagauzia', Russian language



[In reference to a post showing Ukrainian soldiers in hospital (unverified)]  
*"Inject them with anthrax, it is very possible, or tuberculosis for these creatures. And purely hypothetically, if the manda Chisinauskaya will discover rabies will she be disposed of?"*

Gender unknown, Telegram group 'Republic of Gagauzia', Russian language



*"Bitches. The freaks have arrived no one knows how many more of them are here. Everyone should be exposed and to close the borders."*

Gender - unknown, Telegram group, "Republic of Gagauzia", Russian language

Of particular concern are comments that can potentially incite harmful action against Ukrainian refugees, including actions to 'expose' refugees, pro-Russia sentiments coupled with notions that the US embassy will be destroyed and a call for people to group together to 'control' Ukrainians and 'react harshly' to hostile actions and statements.



*"All geeks to identify and put on record. It is necessary to create an agency for the affairs of unreliable citizens and carefully control their activities, reacting harshly to their hostile"*

Gender – male, Telegram Group, Moldavian Politic, Russian language



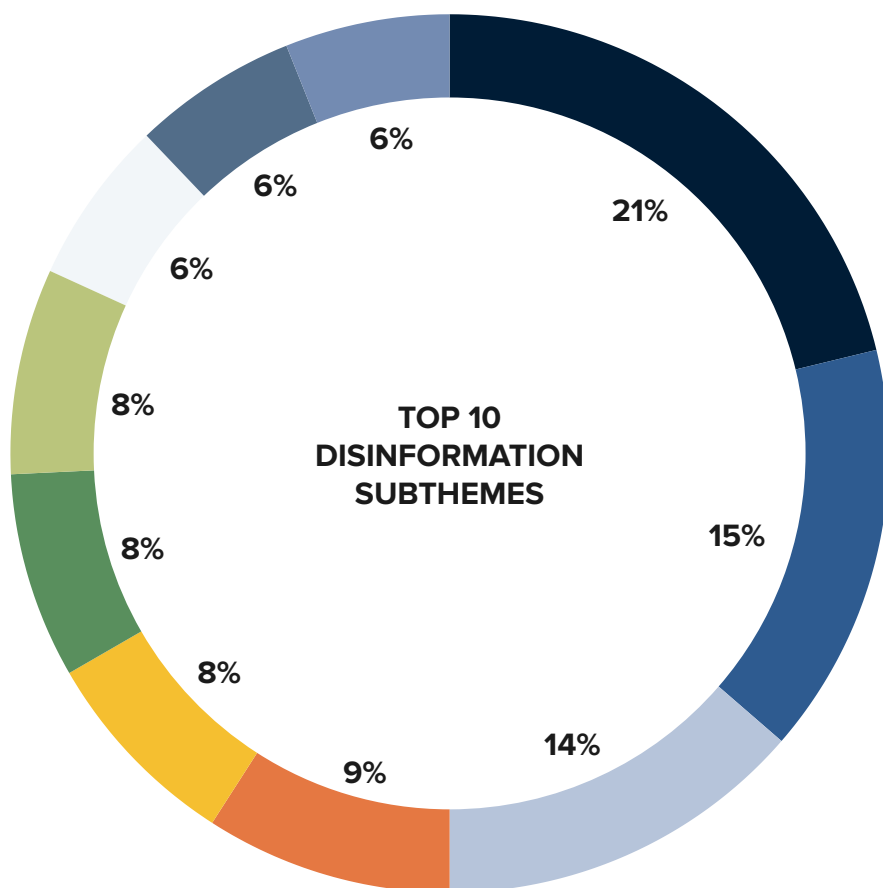
*"Glory to Russia Victory, you'll see who wins before May 9 [Victory Day - World War II], that's for sure Moldova, the US embassy will be destroyed."*

Male, Telegram Group 'Arguments and facts in Moldova', Russian language

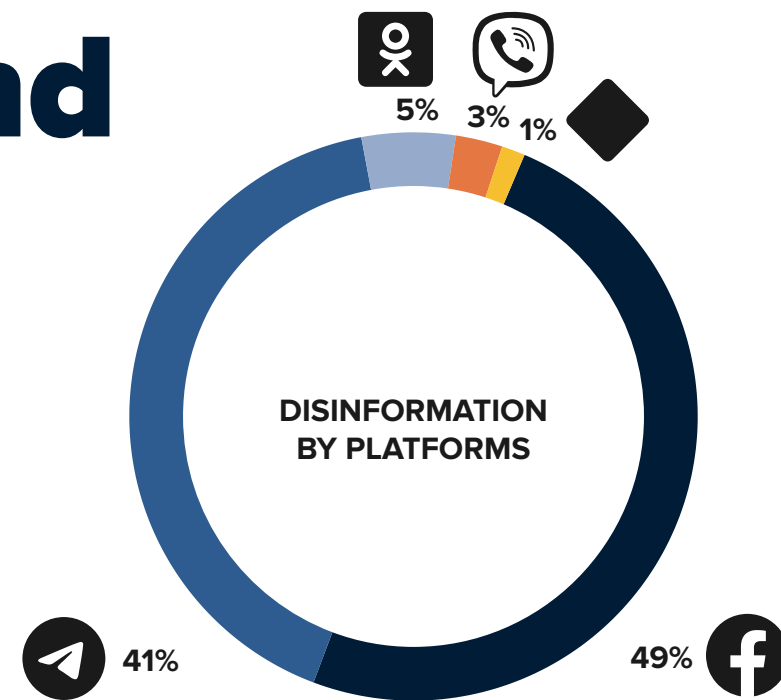
<sup>14</sup> SPL Centre, 2021

<sup>15</sup> Strandberg et al, 2021

# Misinformation and Disinformation



- Ukrainian refugees are Nazis
- Ukrainian refugees are the cause of destabilization
- Use of derogatory language
- Ukrainian refugees are wealthy
- Moldova entering the war
- Other
- Ukrainians are aligned with the west
- Bot activity
- Target Ukrainian refugees
- Ukrainian refugees steal / destroy property



Research conducted for an Internews report on threats in digital communication for Ukrainian refugees in Romania and Moldova found that since the start of the refugee response, Kremlin-backed disinformation campaigns - including divisive anti-refugee sentiments - have been circulated via social media posts in countries hosting the outpouring of refugees, including Moldova<sup>16</sup>. Research from the UK-based Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) highlighted false reports made about alleged crimes or attacks attributed to Ukrainian refugees. According to the ISD analysis from October 2022 examining Russian-language discussions about refugees on Telegram, different groups are targeted with sometimes polarizing narratives (for example, refugees are not welcome in Europe and refugees are a threat

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/moldova-disinformation-war-ukraine>

to the host countries).<sup>17</sup> To help address this, Ukraine and Moldova made operational requests to Europol to take down the Telegram messages spreading the disinformation and fake news, which Europol responded to by taking down specific Telegram channels used for pro-Russian disinformation and fake news (EC3 and EU Internet Referral Unit).<sup>18</sup>

In the February 2023 Periodic Insight into disinformation narratives about the war in Ukraine, the European Digital Media Observatory released insights into false information circulating about Ukrainians, the war and President Zelensky.<sup>19</sup> Data collected in this social listening focused on the Moldovan online community indicates the spread of some of these narratives, including: European public opinion against support for Ukraine in the war, that Ukrainian refugees are Nazis, are cowards and are corrupted and embezzling aid funds. The scope of this research was not extensive enough to determine whether these sentiments were shared because of Russian interference, or whether they are affirming sentiments that already exists in some sections of Moldovan society.

27 per cent of data was aligned with reported disinformation narratives, including:

**Ukrainian refugees are Nazis or aligned with fascist groups** (5 per cent of data collected) including that it is only Nazis who have fled Ukraine and are using Moldova to escape consequence. This sentiment aligns with Republic of Moldova Public Opinion Barometer<sup>20</sup> findings in 2021 that indicate 15 per cent of Moldovans think the war is a military operation to liberate Ukraine of Nazis, and 17 per

cent believe Russia is defending themselves from attacks by Ukraine. A series of posts in response to a media article about anti-Russian graffiti painted on houses in the city of Balti quickly sparked references to Nazis / fascists.



*"It just infuriates me that the Nazis came to us to "sit out" and paint their symbols and slogans on our own houses".*

Female, Telegram Group 'Bogdan Tirdea'<sup>21</sup>, Russian language



*"This was probably done by the Ukro-fascist, we have a lot of them, such as refugees."*

Female, Telegram Group, 'Bogdan Tirdea', Russian language

Narratives that **Ukrainians are wealthy** (4 per cent of data collected), including that only wealthy people and fascists fled and that poor, 'good' people remain in Ukraine. Comments tended to focus particularly on expensive cars and how Ukrainian refugees in Moldova dress (getting beauty treatments, for example). These comments were often coupled with reference to Ukrainian refugees receiving monthly cash payments or other supports, and many comments were in reaction to the introduction of Temporary Protection for Ukrainian refugees in Moldova.



*"They are paid assistance for housing and [food], and they drive Porsches and Mercedes."*

Male, Facebook page for Point (online news website), Russian language



*"...They have food, clothes, this certificate for free all purchases. 4,000 lei are received clean. They go for hair. Manicure. Brows. Increase eyelashes. Queens. They feed them for free. And we didn't have that kind of thing. And in Europe they are all forced to work and they are not given any benefits. The question is for whom these refugees preen? Look, our men will be taken away."*

Female, Telegram 'Arguments and Facts in Moldova' group, Russian language



*"Yes, here half of the refugees travel in vehicles worth \$ 100,000 to provide protection for these creatures?"*

Male, Telegram 'Arguments and Facts in Moldova' group, Russian language

There was also evidence of a less prominent counter-narrative that Ukrainians are poor and are using the war as an excuse to flee poverty and come to Moldova as economic refugees, taking advantage of the available supports.

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.isdglobal.org/digital\\_dispatches/a-false-picture-for-many-audiences-how-russian-language-pro-kremlin-telegram-channels-spread-propaganda-and-disinformation-about-refugees-from-ukraine/](https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/a-false-picture-for-many-audiences-how-russian-language-pro-kremlin-telegram-channels-spread-propaganda-and-disinformation-about-refugees-from-ukraine/)

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.europol.europa.eu/europolper centE2per cent80per cent99s-solidarity-ukraine>

<sup>19</sup> <https://edmo.eu/war-in-ukraine-the-fact-checked-disinformation-detected-in-the-eu/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://bop.ipp.md/en>

<sup>21</sup> Deputy Leader of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova, [known for his anti-West sentiments](#)





*"You, refugees from Ukraine, have you fled to Moldova to get rich? Not ashamed? Return to your place in Ukraine, and get rich there, the Clown will add to you."*

Gender / unknown, Telegram Group 'Note-book Moldova', Russian language



*"They fled from poverty, not war. They thought it would be better abroad, but they were not welcome there."*

Female, Odnoklassniki, Point.md (Official page Online media), Russian

Ukrainians are aligned with "the West" (2 per cent of data collected), including the United Nations, the European Union and the United States. There was also a dominant narrative that those who support Ukrainians (including humanitarian agencies, the Moldovan government and political figures – particularly the President Sandu) are doing so because they are aligned with the West or follow the will of the West.



*"Forget all agreements - khokhols will come in and reach the warehouses in Kolbasnaya<sup>22</sup>...and NATO will support them in this."*

Gender unknown, Telegram 'Republic of Gagauzia', Russian language



*Everything is for the Ukrainians, nothing for the Moldovans, the main thing is that the Europeans and Biden like it.*

Male, Facebook Group 'Arguments and facts in Moldova', Russian language

Ukrainians are the cause of destabilisation (5 per cent of data collected). During the monitoring period several incidents involving changes and volatility in the Moldovan government occurred resulting in media coverage and social media posts. Based on the sample data collected, this research shows those incidents and coverage prompted people to draw connections between the volatility and Ukrainian refugees, likely building on disinformation narratives already present in the community. Sentiments about Ukrainian refugees as the cause of destabilisation also stemmed from media attention on Ukrainians participating in street protests in Chişinău – including protests not related to the war, such as an LGBTQ+ and feminist march that took place on International Women's Day (March 8).

Threats of terrorist activity and unrest in breakaway areas and reports of Russian claims (which were dismissed by the Moldovan government)<sup>23</sup> of a Ukrainian plot to invade Transnistria saw a general increase in comments associating Ukrainian refugees with destabilization. Most related comments do not specifically mention refugees, but many do refer to Ukrainians in Moldova, as opposed to more general comments about geo-political concerns related to Russia. Some comments point to what they see to be tools of destabilization, such as growing populations of Ukrainians in separatist areas, speaking Ukrainian language and covering up military presence with refugees.



*"They want to impose war on us."*

Female, TV8 (Moldovan TV channel) Facebook page, Romanian language



*"The task is clear.... introduce troops under the pretext of refugees....wait for the signal and together with the nationalists, put pressure on Transnistria and the 'Azovites' are already here??? Mariupol 2....2.6 million Moldovans as human shields. Excellent. What's next?"*

Male, Telegram Group 'Komsomol Truth in Moldova', Russian language



*"Yes, I want to know what language they will talk when they will work in the country's territory, we know well that separatists from any country destabilize the country and even lead to war, they will want the Ukrainian language if they will be in a much more number, we have enough Russian roots that they make a mess in Moldova."*

Female, TV8 (Moldavian TV channel) Facebook page, Romanian language

**Claims that Ukrainians are connected to terrorist activity** (1 per cent of data collected). Most of the data mentioning Ukrainian refugees as being connected with terrorist activity related to the rumoured insurgency in Transnistria (also referred to as Pridnestrovie below).

<sup>22</sup>Kolbasnaya / Cobasna is a reported [illegal arms depot located in Transnistria](#)

<sup>23</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/24/moldova-dismisses-russia-claims-of-ukraine-plot-to-invade-transnistria-region>





*"The leader of Pridnestrovie also said that those who arrived as refugees from Ukraine organized a terrorist network to carry out the terrorist act, it was neutralized. According to him, the authorities will identify everyone who is recruited and assisted this group."*

Gender unknown, Odnoklassniki page for TV Center (Russian TV), Russian language



*"There is no need to accept and feed refugees from Ukraine and our expense. Zelensky is trying to destroy peace in country. Prepared a terrorist attack in Transnistria. They must be judged. We [come] to them in peace and they to us with war."*

Female, Komsomol Truth in Moldova Facebook group, Russian language

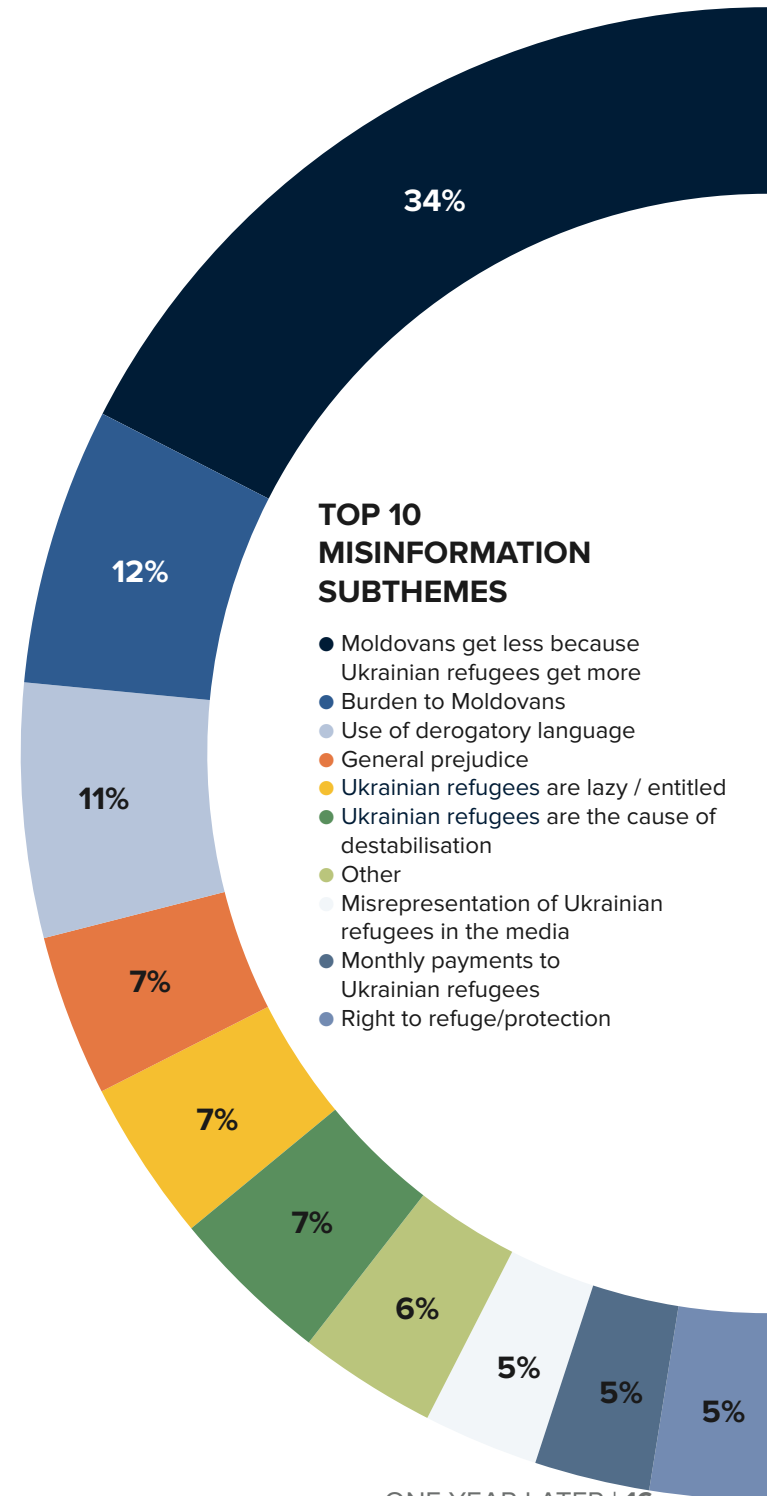
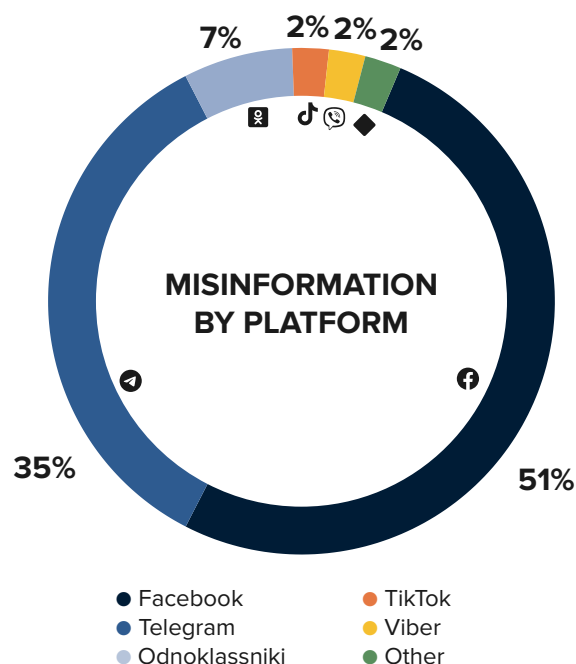


*"Apparently, this is a sign of "gratitude" for everything that Pridnestrovie has done for them...For all their refugees, whom it hosted in thousands, waters and feeds .. Well, as they say...Everyone shares what he has, what he can. They are terrorist attacks and death, apparently, nothing more. Is this the only gratitude and appreciation they can give?"*

Female, personal Facebook page, Russian language

Based on the sample data, disinformation narratives and violent sentiments were particularly prevalent in relation to break-away areas of Transnistria and Gagauzia. As described above, sentiments around terrorism and destabilisation focused on the situation in Transnistria.

In addition to narratives currently known to be associated with Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns, the research identified sentiments, opinions and rumours classed as misinformation (26 per cent of data collected). In most cases, some elements of the sentiments were based on real experiences of the Moldovans posting and were therefore categorised as Beliefs or Observations (47 per cent of data collected). However, components of many of these comments can be seen as linked to be furthering misinformation.



**Ukrainians refugees should be fighting in the war**, refugees are cowards (3 per cent of collected data). Many of these sentiments were prompted by Ukrainian refugees participating in ongoing peaceful protests outside the Russian embassy in Chişinău. Sentiments seemed particularly targeted to young Ukrainian men, with some more forceful language around 'returning them to Ukraine' present particularly on Telegram.

*"Well, you fled from war and death, we accepted you, well, live in peace for yourself. What are you doing with these rags, cause a gag reflex. Well, what a mania to get into everyone's eyes and show that you are from 404?! It doesn't add up a little, if you think you are a patriot, then go to the front, and if you ran away, then hide the flag "patriot" kuva."*

Gender – unknown, Telegram Group, Republic of Gagauzia, Russian language

*"And what does he do in Moldova so young? When should he be on the front line and how was he missed?"*

Female, Odnoklassniki page, SalutMoldova/Hi Moldova, Russian language

*"In Transnistria, it is necessary to return all these "refugees" men to Ukraine."*

Gender Unknown, Telegram group 'Komsomol Truth in Moldova', Russian language

*"So, what the hell is this bullshit, they live among poor pensioners and drunks? Bitch, with guns in hands and put them in the trenches, that's for sure put the pig at the table."*

Gender Unknown, Telegram Group 'Republic of Gagauzia', Russian language

Sentiments that **Moldovans get less because Ukrainians get more** was the most dominant recorded misinformation / belief and observation narrative, representing 10 per cent of the collected data. As news and information circulated in February and March about the Moldovan government granting of Temporary Protection to displaced Ukrainians, researchers sought out related posts in response. Many comments were positive and supportive of the Temporary Protection measures; however (in line with the focus of this research) researchers collected a significant portion of negative comments. Comments ranged from urges for Ukrainian refugees to go home, to concerns that refugees being granted Temporary Protection will mean that Moldovans are worse off. Pensioners were often mentioned as part of the population in Moldova lacking resources and support, who are being made more vulnerable due to resources going 'instead' to Ukrainian refugees.

*"The government of Moldova takes away the mouth of its people and gives it to the Ukrainians!"*

Gender unknown, Telegram group 'Moldova Notebook', Russian language

*"Our pensioners are standing on the side-lines and cannot receive pensions. And [Ukrainians] are arrogant and unscrupulous. We are patient Moldovans. But there is such word - fear patient wrath."*

Gender unknown platform, Facebook page for Point.md, Russian language

*"What crests creatures are these khokhols! The allowance to you, the Nazis, is paid by Moldovans and Gagauz, while the people Moldova survives in poverty, perish the khokhols creature."*

Gender unknown, Telegram, Гагаузская Республика (Gagauz Republic), Russian

Related perceptions indicated a widespread sense that the **Ukrainian refugee response is a burden on Moldovan people** (6 per cent) and – to a lesser extent – the Moldovan government (2 per cent). These narratives centred particularly around health-care, likely prompted by increases to the cost of health policies for Moldovan people in late 2022<sup>24</sup>.

*"Therefore, Moldovans have to buy medical policy for 12,000 lei to cover the services done to Ukrainians." (Comment under a news article that Ukrainians have access to emergency healthcare)*

Female, Facebook, NOI.MD на русском (Official page Online media), Russian language

<sup>24</sup>Moldpress, December 2022



*"Moldova is the poorest country in Europe. Why did you come here? The people here are poor. Refugees live richer than Moldovans. Refugees do not want to work, but who should support them? The budget of poor Moldova supports them by robbing the population of their country. Don't complain, it's even worse for us."*

Female, Facebook group 'Arguments and facts in Moldova', Russian language



*"Moldova helps as much as it can. And to arrange a job, and collects humanitarian aid. I'll tell you more! And the [health] policies are free and training in kindergartens and schools. Whatever it is, it also gives out of the taxpayers' money, and without money from outside, we would not even be able to feed ourselves. We keep afloat. For our poor country, these small amounts of help carry enormous weight for us."*

Female, Facebook, Point.md (Official page Online media), Russian language

Narratives regarding burden on Moldovans also intersected with a perception that Moldovans are being taken advantage of by Ukrainian refugees (1 per cent). A small amount of data collected also provided insights into connections between this narrative and the belief that Ukrainian people think Moldovans are uneducated (less than 1 per cent of

data collected). Additionally, sentiments that Ukrainians do not respect Moldovans laws are relatively widespread in the data collected (3 per cent) and can be linked to this sense of Moldovans not being respected.



*"The most obnoxious is the fact that he is mostly right, we are fools for accepting them and now they wipe their feet on us."*

Male, Tik-Tok personal account, Romanian language



*"They live here and take advantage of us."*

Gender unknown, Viber Transnistria group, Russian language

Linked to sentiments that Ukrainian refugees do not respect Moldovans and the Moldovan way of life, as well as widespread stigma around Ukrainian refugees being wealthy, is the opinion that **Ukrainian refugees are lazy and entitled**. This was a fairly common narrative across the data collected (4 per cent) and referred to Ukrainian refugees as unprofessional and not wanting to work. Two of the comments quoted below are in response to an online article reporting that Ukrainian refugees in Switzerland will need to sell their cars in order to receive social benefits.



*Embarrassed creatures, you need to be driven out of work, such a bitch, you were given a job, you sit with a mug snickering and you also get help from us, and the Moldovans survive, where is justice, kick out SUCH CREATURES, kick out!!!!*

Female, Odnoklassniki group 'Salut, Moldova!', Russian language



*"They don't want to work anywhere. And they only require benefits, only apartments"*

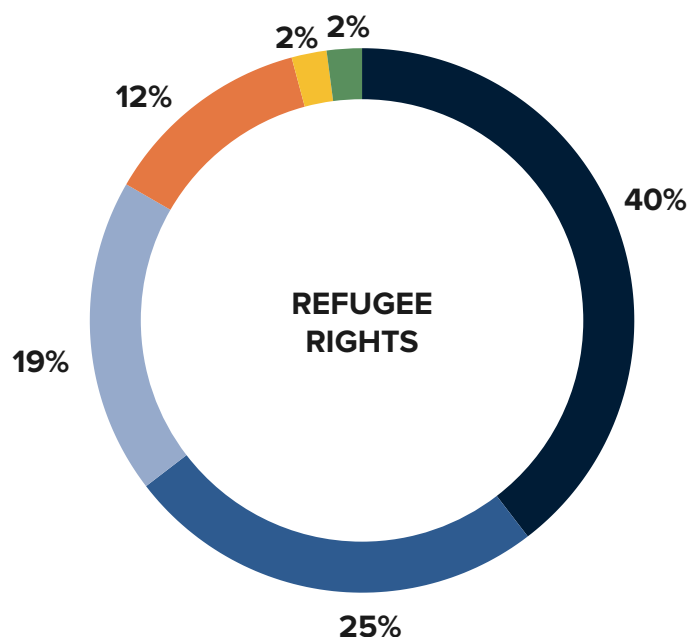
Female, Facebook, Point.md (Official page Online media), Russian language



*"Moldova is a country that received refugees from Ukraine, and the refugees turned out ungrateful [pig emoticon]. Why the hotel is not five-star, why the pool does not work in the hotel, serve them food in restaurants for free because they are Ukrainians. Do not speak Russian with them, then they don't eat, they don't eat, they scam people who let them into their house. and pity those? Moldovans help whoever can. At the customs they meet people and take you refugees wherever you need in their personal cars, but your people entering in Lexuses (sic) with dogs did not lift their fingers to help their fellow countrymen. You have no faith."*

Gender unknown, Facebook, Point.md (Official page Online media), Russian

# Refugee rights



- Right to refuge / protection / shelter
- Right to protest
- Ukrainian refugees should be fighting in the war
- Temporary protection
- Forced employment / work
- Right to work

Comments related to refugee rights and protections formed 13 per cent of the data collected. The sentiments collected demonstrated a general lack of understanding and/or dismissal of right to protection, with 17 per cent of the data related to refugee rights containing misinformation or links to disinformation campaigns. Negative sentiments related to protection were particularly triggered with the announcement of Temporary Protection for Ukrainian refugees and third-country nationals in Moldova.

*"They do not need protection, but the drive back to their homeland. They are pumping their rights all over the world, like the elite of the whole world. Ugh!!!"*

Female, Telegram 'Arguments and facts in Moldova', Russian language

*"We should adopt a law regarding their deportation."*

Gender unknown, Telegram, Republic of Gagauz group, Russian language

Negative sentiments around the right for refugees to protest were prominent, with researchers monitoring an increase in derogatory and violent language in response to media coverage of Ukrainian people's participation in a feminist and LGBTIQ+ march that took place on 8 March. Some negative sentiments pointed to frustrations that Ukrainian protestors were allowed to celebrate Ukraine when the march passed the Russian embassy, and that Ukrainian refugees were allowed to join the protest at all. According to a survey conducted in Moldova in June 2022, 64 percent of respondents would "exclude" LGBT people from Moldova, making it likely that prejudice against people with diverse sexual orientation and gender identity is coupling with anti-Ukrainian refugee sentiments in this case.<sup>25</sup>

*"These fagots (sic) should be shot right away."*

Male, Telegram group 'Arguments and facts in Moldova', Russian language

*"Why aren't the police cracking down on these fucked up guys? And why Ceban [mayor of Chişinău] gave a square for these noobs, for people to watch these scum on holidays."*

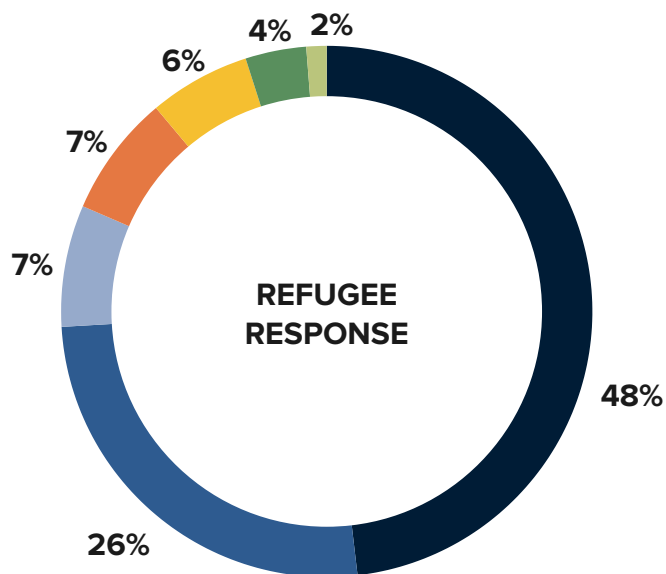
Female, Telegram group 'Arguments and facts in Moldova', Russian language

*"They should protest at their home."*

Female, Facebook, TV8 (Official page Online media), Romanian

<sup>25</sup> [Radio Europa, June 2022](#)

## REFUGEE RESPONSE AND PERCEPTIONS OF HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES



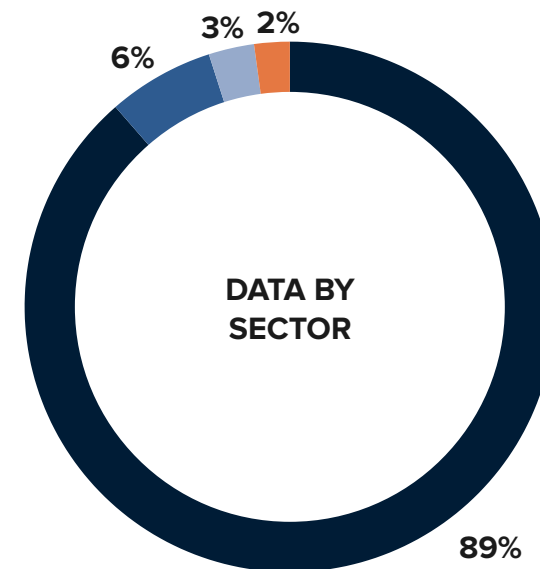
- Moldovans get less because Ukrainian refugees get more
- Burden on Moldovans
- Burden on Moldovan government
- Monthly payments to Ukrainian refugees
- Inequality of aid
- Other
- Misinfo about who funds the response

*"The money has been allocated so far on paper. And how many of them will reach the addressee?"*

Female, Telegram 'Moldova Notebook' group, Russian language

According to Internews' recent Information Ecosystem Assessment, Moldovan citizens are calling for greater transparency in the refugee response, wanting to know more about how money allocated to refugees is sourced (25 percent) and how it is spent (25 percent). Importantly, a significant portion (24 percent) of Moldovans surveyed also indicated they are not interested in information about the response. Misinformation and disinformation within Moldovan's online discourse related to the response was identified in this research, aligning with both the call for more transparency and information and the level of unwillingness or indifference to be more informed, indicated in the assessment.

Of the negative comments and sentiments that related to specific humanitarian assistance sectors, the majority were concerned with Protection (6 per cent) and Cash (3 per cent). Some comments expressed concerns that money would not be reaching refugees, and others complain about the amount of money that refugees receive in comparison to welfare for Moldovan people, or that refugees are fraudulent in their collection of cash assistance (for example, getting a job while also collecting humanitarian aid). There is also a persistent theme of comments conflating humanitarian assistance with government assistance, and little indication that there is awareness or understanding of how government services and humanitarian cash assistance are coordinated.



- N/A
- Protection
- Cash
- Health

*"By the way, about refugees... Moldova considers Pridnestrovian refugees as its own. The EU allocates aid for them, as for Moldovan ones. Has Pridnestrovia ever received these funds?"*

Gender unknown, Telegram Group, WTF Moldova?!, Russian language



*"Already got these arrogant bastards to the pointless, they behave boorishly everywhere they must be driven away with a smelly broom from here, let the sandu (sic), gross, gavrilitza (sic), their backs be taken and supported at their own expense and not at our taxes and to the detriment of our poor pensioners. There is money for them in the form of an allowance when they enter the country, they immediately give a card for 3000.00 lei, but there is no money to compensate poor grandparents, they say "the budget is not rubber"*

Gender unknown, Telegram 'Republic of Gagauzia', Russian language

The data also indicates efforts to associate humanitarian support for refugees with a targeted agenda to keep Ukrainian refugees out of Western European countries. The following comment was made on a Facebook group with 79,000 members (though with relatively little traction on posts):

*"The EU and the UN are doing everything so that the refugees do not end up in Europe ... here's the money for you and sort it out."*

Male, Facebook group 'Fresh news from the Republic of Moldova', Russian language

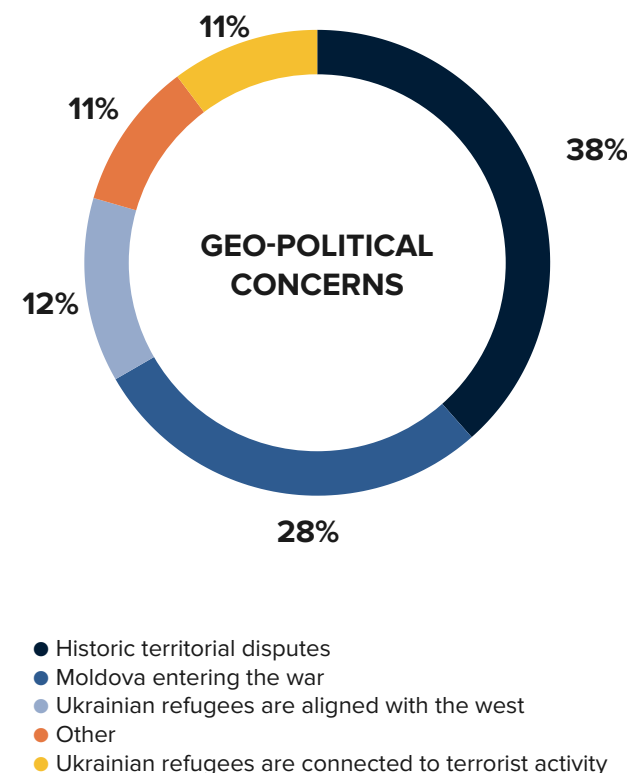
The sample data collected did not specifically indicate negative sentiments towards humanitarian refugee services, but rather a general dissatisfaction that refugees were being supported.

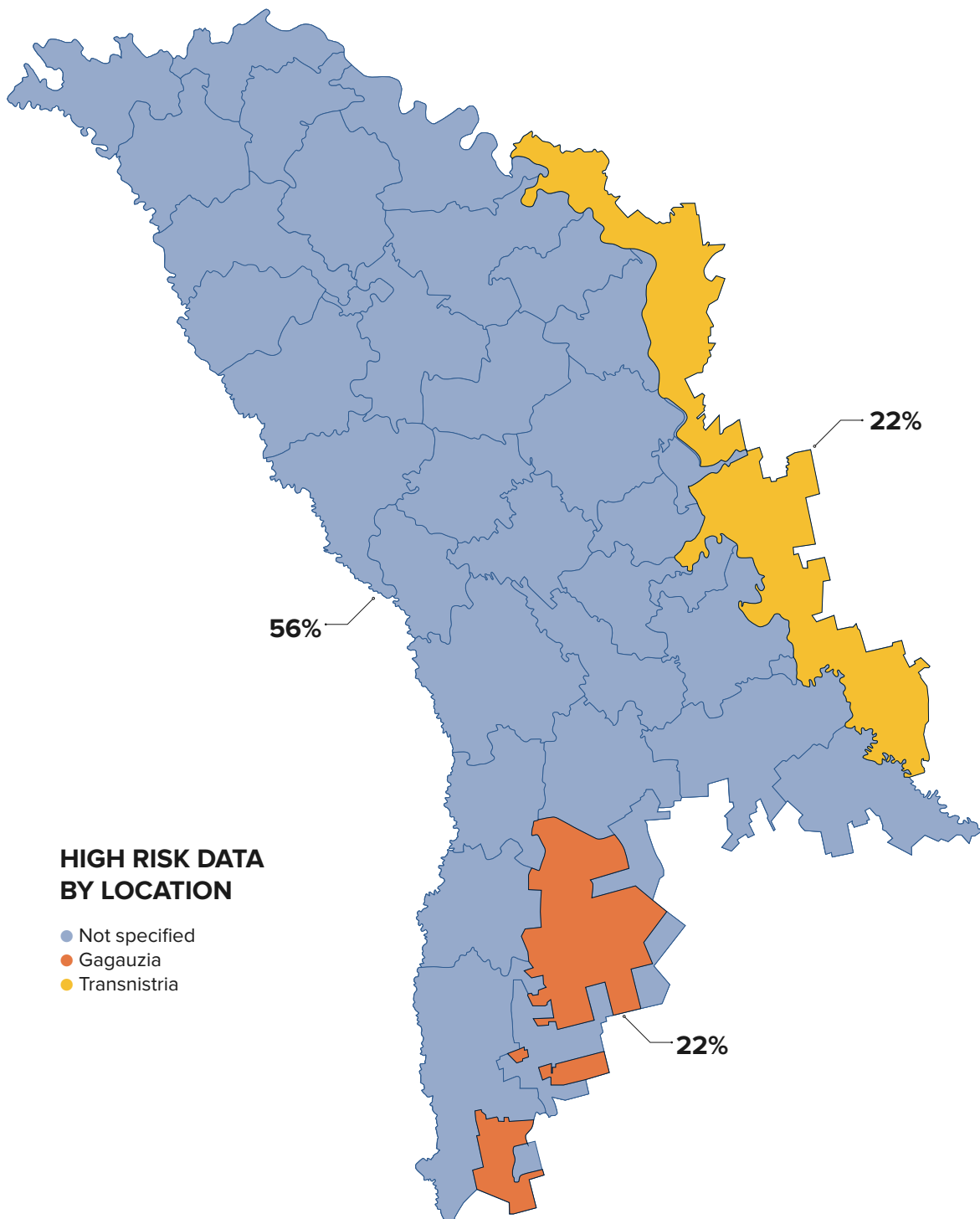
## LANGUAGE AND HISTORICAL SOCIAL TENSIONS

According to the recent Information Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) on the Ukrainian Refugee Response in Moldova (conducted by Internews), though many Ukrainians and Moldovans can communicate in Russian, there is evidence that historical and social connotations related to certain languages can fuel social tensions.<sup>26</sup> 72 percent of Ukrainian refugees report speaking Russian at home and interestingly, Moldovan participants reporting speaking Russian at home almost as frequently as Romanian (46 percent compared to 49 percent). Despite presenting opportunities for social cohesion, the Russian language has also grown to be a sensitive issue for some communities in Moldova. According to the assessment, many Ukrainians mentioned exclusively speaking in Russian in public — even when speaking with other Ukrainians — due to negative reactions from Moldovans when overheard speaking Ukrainian. These experiences also differ from place to place. Refugees in Bălți preferred speaking publicly in Russian, and some had received threats when speaking in Ukrainian. In Cahul, refugees faced the opposite challenge: Ukrainian participants mentioned being criticised by Moldovans when they were overheard speaking Russian and being urged to learn Romanian.

In this research, data collected affirmed the presence of those social tensions, particularly related to concerns that use of the Ukrainian language signifies instability or separatism from Ukrainian refugees. Data also links stigma about the use of Ukrainian language to a perceived sense of entitlement of Ukrainian refugees (as described above).

<sup>26</sup>[Internews Information Ecosystem Assessment](#) - Floods and deserts: information access and barriers in Moldova's refugee response, March 2023





*"Yes, I want to know what language will they talk when they will work in the country's territory, we know well that separatists from any country destabilize the country and even lead to war, they will want the Ukrainian language if they will be [much more in] number, we have enough Russian roots that they make a mess in Moldova."*

Female, Facebook, TV8 (Official page Online media), Romanian language



*"Maybe we also have to speak Ukrainian language, and at school we'll start to learn Ukrainian and to worship to everyone."*

Gender unknown, Facebook, Stiri din Republica Moldova (Fresh news from the Republic of Moldova), Russian language



*"We accept them and after that they don't like that we speak Russian. And they organize pickets in the center of Chisinau! What do we need this???"*

Female, Facebook page for ATU Gagauzia, Russian language

Four per cent of data was recorded as relating to historic territorial disputes, and this was evident particularly in posts related to Transnistria.



*"Hell they need? Should be killed. When you transit Ukraine, they drain you to the last penny. They find any reason to clean you up of everything. Let them stay in their whores country. In 1992, non Moldovan didn't run away, we all endured everything. Our government is making a big mistake to keep those rats were, they must be chased back to their country. It wouldn't spend so much with these IDIOTS."*

Male, Facebook, European Union in the Republic of Moldova, Romanian



# Conclusion

This research has presented analysis from a brief and targeted snapshot of online social tensions in Moldova about the Ukrainian refugee response. It does not attempt to represent the whole of Moldovan community sentiments – including the huge amount of support for and solidarity with refugees in Moldova, nor be exhaustive in its investigation of the depths and nuances of mis- and disinformation and prejudice that mar some online spaces. However, the notable violence, stigma and success of disinformation campaigns that is so obviously evident amongst the data collected can bring more understanding to humanitarian and government interactions with Moldovan communities.

Sentiments to highlight include a sense of exhaustion and burden from Moldovan people, which appears to link with a tendency to revert to prejudiced and derogatory statements and generalisations about Ukrainian refugees. Fear is evidently driving angry and violent online responses that position Ukrainian refugees as complicit in destabilisation efforts and increasing inequality. Situations that trigger negative sentiments (exacerbated by some instances of misrepresentation in media coverage) include Ukrainian refugees' involvement in protests, rumoured terrorist activity and insurgency, use of Ukrainian language and Ukrainians appearing to flaunt wealth. Lack of understanding of refugee rights and humanitarian response coordination with government means that recent measures such as Temporary Protection have triggered negative responses.

# Recommendations

Informed by this research, the Information Ecosystem Assessment recently undertaken on the Ukrainian refugee response in Moldova, as well as Internews' research report studying threats in digital communication for Ukrainian refugees in Romania and Moldova, Internews makes the following recommendations for humanitarian actors and civil society:

**Continue to listen and respond** - Social listening activities that work to understand perceptions, needs, gaps and importantly misperceptions should be bolstered in both online and offline spaces in both the refugee and host community. By presenting data from these groups separately, it allows for comparison of shared misperceptions gaps and the early warning identification of rising social tensions. Sentiments online and digital risks are important to monitor by all actors, particularly protection actors, in particular during times of political tension where risks might increase. However listening alone is half of the process, refugees and host community members need access to two-way dialogue to allow them space to ask questions, tailor information to their needs and to combat harmful narratives that are grounded in information gaps.

**Invest in social cohesion** efforts before social tensions worsen. Refugee responding agencies have prioritised [activities to address social cohesion](#) this year, including activities delivered by IOM Moldova. These activities are critical to give communities a place to interact, build understanding of each other's experience and to work towards collaborative solutions to challenges.

**Cooperation and coordination:** humanitarian actors need to foster better coordination with non-traditional actors such as local media, social media platforms human rights, misinformation and hate speech monitoring groups. There is a lot of work being done to identify and respond to harmful online content outside of the refugee response, and the contextual knowledge of these expert groups could improve responses within the refugee response. By inviting non-traditional actors into coordination mechanisms or arranging semi-regular forums to bring together all the actors in the information ecosystem together, a richer and more collaborative discussion about the risks, challenges, and possible responses can happen. According to the 2023 Information Ecosystem Assessment, local media is the number one-way Moldovan citizens choose to inform themselves about the refugee response and its priorities. These information providers have a role to play in providing clear information to respond to rumours and information gaps as well as highlighting venues for social harmony.

**Support community information providers:** Work with the administrators of private social media groups and volunteers to offer training on content moderation/management, reporting of online risks, service mapping, information literacy, and fact checking and verification techniques. These administrators play a key role in moderating discussion and need to be equipped to respond to online risks and connected to key protection referral mechanisms to ensure high risk content receives appropriate action to protect users.

**Increase transparency** where possible to help respond to misperceptions and rumours about support.

- Provide clear information to refugees and host community about the priorities of the response and how aid is funded and allocated.
- Support local media to understand and implement their role as an accountability tool for the response
- Clarify where vulnerability criteria is being used to determine beneficiaries.
- Address rumours and misperceptions circulating within the Moldovan community about the funding, distribution, and priorities of aid.
- Ensure your organisation has adequate data security practices and increase open communication with refugees on how their personal data will be protected when they provide it to you.
- Service providers can input their activities on the [Services Advisor map](#) and share the link with refugees so they can more easily find services in their area.

**Improve feedback mechanisms:** Identify ways to make people feel more comfortable sharing their actual feedback and create more spaces where people can voice their concern. Consider information campaigns for host communities and Ukrainians about the importance of feedback, and community feedback mechanisms' impact on aid processes and provide clear evidence of where complaints and feedback have directly contributed to change in the response to foster a culture of feedback. Rather than focusing on, 'why aren't people giving feedback', make the case for why they should feel motivated to participate. To combat reservations related to the fear of being perceived as ungrateful, relief agencies need to proactively report back to the community on the feedback they do receive, and the positive changes made in response. Feedback reports are often kept as internal documents. Openly displaying the tangible results of feedback on popular information platforms and in face-to-face interactions with the community will increase trust and encourage greater participation in these systems.