

LANGUAGE DIVERSITY AND MULTICULTURALISM IN MOLDOVA: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

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Abstract: This article explores the linguistic aspects of diversity and multiculturalism in the Republic of Moldova, a country where multiple languages coexist and interact in complex ways. As the official state language recognized by the constitution, Romanian is vital to public life and civic engagement. Russian is still widely used, nonetheless, particularly in urban settings, trade, and interethnic contact. Together with these two prominent languages, smaller communities also conserve Gagauz, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, and Romani, all important components of Moldova's cultural diversity. The complexities of language are heightened by migration dynamics, encompassing both immigration and emigration: Moldovans abroad adopt new vocabulary, while returning migrants and their children face challenges with reintegration. Additionally, English has emerged as a key language for economic prospects, advanced education, and global mobility, illustrating Moldova's increasing participation in processes of European integration and international networks. According to this article, Moldova's multilingualism represents a double-edged sword. While linguistic diversity provides communities with a sense of continuity and belonging, it also enhances cultural rights, identity, and social cohesion. However, varying levels of proficiency in the official language frequently result in differences in education, obstacles in the job market, and restricted access to public services. Without intentional policy support, minority and endangered languages—like Romani—are also at risk of losing their domains and experiencing generational decline. The study focuses on how community-driven projects, educational frameworks, and official laws interact to shape Moldova's linguistic environment.

This article places Moldova in the context of larger discussions on multilingualism and integration by referencing sociolinguistic ideas like code-switching, diglossia, and intergenerational transmission. Protecting minority languages, guaranteeing widespread participation through Romanian proficiency, and developing bridging mechanisms to facilitate integration and reintegration are the three pillars of the Protect–Participate–Bridge framework that it suggests. By doing this, it highlights how crucial it is to implement balanced linguistic policies that protect Moldova's multilingual legacy while guaranteeing fair access to civic life, work, and education.

Keywords: multiculturalism, linguistic diversity, international mobility, bridging mechanisms, educational frameworks, reintegration, minority

JEL Classification: J240, Z130

INTRODUCTION

Globally, societies are becoming more multicultural as a result of the quick rise in international migration, technology communication, and cultural interchange. Language is an important cultural and identity marker in many societies, reflecting both their diversity and challenges. Globalization, migration, and digital communication rapidly transform societies into multicultural and multilingual environments. In such contexts, language functions not only as a communication tool but also as a symbolic resource tied to identity, group belonging, and political power (Bialystok, 2012; Hermanto et al., 2012). Multiculturalism, which promotes the coexistence of diverse cultural identities under a single national framework, frequently interacts with linguistic variety. While

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some argue that linguistic diversity can strengthen mixed cultures, others assert that it may present serious challenges to social cohesion and national unity.

Moldova—positioned between Romania and Ukraine—is a highly relevant case for studying these tensions. With Romanian as the official state language, Russian as a widely used interethnic language, and minority languages such as Gagauz, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, and Romani, Moldova represents a complex linguistic ecosystem (Guțu, 2021; Council of Europe, 2019). While linguistic diversity enriches cultural identity, it also poses challenges for social cohesion, educational equality, and political stability.

The dilemma of whether language diversity acts as a unifying factor that prevents national unity or as a bridge for integration and cultural expression is complicated by its role in forming multicultural communities. The discussion highlights the ways in which language policies impact multicultural identities and explores the advantages and difficulties of multilingualism in fostering social peace and political stability through case studies from nations like Canada, Belgium, India, Switzerland, and South Africa.

LANGUAGE DIVERSITY IN MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

The use and existence of multiple languages within a community is known as "language diversity." One distinctive feature of multilingual cultures is the diverse linguistic heritage of numerous cultural or ethnic groupings. Through bilingual or multilingual policies that acknowledge and meet the linguistic demands of diverse people, language diversity is institutionalized in several countries. This kind of diversity can include unofficial languages spoken by immigrant or minority groups as well as official languages, including those acknowledged by the government. In Moldova, Romanian serves as the state language and primary medium of administration, while Russian offers interethnic communication and access to cultural networks. Minority languages preserve local identities but have limited institutional domains (Ciobotaru, 2023). These hierarchies influence educational outcomes, media consumption, and political alignment.

In diverse, multicultural societies, language is much more than just a way to talk—it's a deep part of who people are and where they come from. It connects generations, carries traditions, and reflects cultural roots. In cities shaped by globalization, speaking multiple languages is often seen as a strength, opening doors to richer cultural experiences and broader thinking. But this diversity also comes with challenges. When one language—often that of the dominant group—becomes linked with power or what it means to be "truly" part of a nation, it can create tension and raise tough questions about fairness and inclusion.

In the realm of language, multiculturalism supports the idea that the variety of languages spoken within a country is a vital part of its cultural identity and heritage. It encourages the recognition and protection of minority languages, seeing them not just as means of communication but as essential threads in the nation's cultural tapestry. Multicultural policies often strive to strike a balance: supporting minority language preservation while also promoting the full participation of diverse communities in the country's social, economic, and political life. In this context, multilingualism is celebrated as a valuable resource—it helps maintain cultural traditions, fosters social inclusion, and encourages greater empathy and understanding among different cultural groups.

The interplay between multiculturalism and language presents considerable complexities. While embracing linguistic diversity is a crucial step towards equity and respect, it can also introduce challenges when it comes to building a unified national identity. Officially recognizing multiple languages may, in some cases, unintentionally deepen divisions between groups, especially if communities become socially or linguistically isolated. Rather than bridging cultural differences, such separation can reinforce ethnic boundaries, making it harder to create a shared sense of belonging across the whole society. This tension raises important questions for

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policymakers about how to celebrate and protect diversity, while also encouraging integration and common identity that bring people together.

Multiculturalism in language policy goes beyond simply recognizing differences—it’s about striking a balance that celebrates diversity while keeping society connected. It means making sure everyone’s voice is respected and included, while also fostering a shared sense of belonging and unity. In Moldova, language plays a crucial role in the country’s multicultural identity, and as Business English teachers, it is eye-witnessed how this complexity impacts communication and professional integration. Moldova is home to multiple linguistic communities, including Romanian, Russian, Gagauz, and others. Multiculturalism in Moldova promotes acknowledging these various languages as integral elements of the country’s cultural identity. Policies often aim to preserve minority languages while encouraging individuals to engage with the broader Moldovan society, especially in business and professional settings.

From a business perspective, multilingualism can be a significant advantage. It opens up opportunities for cross-cultural collaboration, expands markets, and enhances networking both within Moldova and internationally. Teaching Business English in this environment means more than language instruction—it involves helping students navigate cultural nuances, bridge communication gaps, and foster mutual understanding between different linguistic groups.

However, Moldova’s language dynamics also present challenges. The ongoing tension between the use of Romanian and Russian can affect social cohesion and professional integration. While official recognition of multiple languages reflects multicultural values, it sometimes risks creating linguistic silos where communities remain divided rather than unified. This can make it harder for businesses to operate seamlessly across different regions and groups, and for individuals to fully participate in the national economy.

As Business English teachers, it is our responsibility to assist students in gaining cultural competency in addition to language proficiency, fostering an appreciation for linguistic variety and collaboration. By doing this, we can encourage a more diverse work environment that leads to cooperation among all members of Moldova's multicultural community.

LANGUAGE AS A KEY TO MULTICULTURAL INTEGRATION: THE EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

In societies characterized by multiculturalism, language policies significantly influence the educational experiences and achievements of students from various backgrounds. Multilingual education systems offer much more than mere language proficiency; they lay an essential groundwork for social inclusion and equitable opportunities. By adopting multiple languages, schools foster learning environments that make all students feel appreciated and acknowledged, independent of their native language. Research from Moldova’s multilingual schools (CREDO, n.d.) shows that students educated primarily in Russian face challenges in higher education, where Romanian-language proficiency is required. Conversely, minority-language schools (Gagauz, Bulgarian, Ukrainian) often struggle with resource shortages, limited teacher training, and outdated curricula.

Bilingual or multilingual education enables students to preserve ties to their cultural roots while acquiring skills in the dominant or official language. This combined approach promotes academic achievement by connecting the home and school experiences, facilitating greater student engagement with the curriculum and full participation in school activities. It also empowers individuals by affirming their linguistic identities, which enhances their confidence and motivation.

Moreover, students who are learning multiple languages and cultures also develop their critical thinking and cognitive flexibility. These abilities are becoming more and more significant in today's globalized society, where intercultural communication plays a vital role. By fostering

respect for linguistic diversity within the classroom, schools contribute to building a more inclusive society that values cultural differences as assets rather than obstacles.

In this way, language education is not only about teaching communication skills but also about nurturing social cohesion and preparing students to thrive in a multicultural world. Thoughtful language policies in education can therefore be a powerful tool to promote integration, reduce inequalities, and cultivate mutual understanding among future generations.

LANGUAGE DIVERSITY AS A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD: POTENTIAL BENEFITS

Cultural Enrichment

Multilingualism fosters shared cultural spaces and supports linguistic creativity through code-mixing and hybrid cultural practices. In countries that officially recognize several languages, the diversity often fuels a flourishing cultural scene. Multiple languages open doors to a wider range of stories, histories, and modes of expression, allowing communities to maintain their distinct identities while contributing to the collective cultural mosaic. This richness can be seen in festivals, theater, media, and even everyday conversations that reflect the blending and coexistence of different cultural narratives.

Beyond preserving traditions, cultural enrichment through language diversity also encourages innovation and creativity. Exposure to multiple linguistic frameworks can inspire new ideas and foster a more open-minded society, where people are more willing to learn from one another and embrace differences.

Preserving Minority and Indigenous Languages

Another critical benefit of linguistic diversity is its role in safeguarding minority and indigenous languages—many of which face extinction due to the dominance of global languages like English, Spanish, or Mandarin. Preserving these languages is essential not only for maintaining cultural heritage but also for protecting unique worldviews and knowledge systems embedded in these tongues.

By valuing and supporting minority languages through policies and programs, multicultural societies help prevent cultural erasure and empower marginalized communities. These efforts can take many forms, including bilingual education, media broadcasting in minority languages, cultural festivals, and official recognition of languages in government and public services.

When minority and indigenous languages are preserved, communities gain a stronger sense of identity and pride, which can improve social well-being and cohesion. It also ensures that younger generations inherit a full sense of their heritage, enabling them to pass down language, customs, and traditions that might otherwise vanish.

Linguistic preservation enriches the world’s cultural diversity and maintains the richness of human expression, which is invaluable not just for the communities involved but for global humanity as a whole. Policies protecting Gagauz, Romani, and Ukrainian support social inclusion. Without explicit support, endangered languages risk rapid intergenerational discontinuity (Council of Europe, 2013).

Promoting Social and Political Cohesion

When managed with care and inclusivity, language diversity can be a powerful force for social unity and political stability. Official recognition and support for multiple languages ensure that all linguistic communities feel acknowledged and respected within the nation’s institutions. This fosters a sense of belonging and participation, reducing feelings of exclusion or marginalization.

In multilingual societies, providing public services, education, and legal proceedings in several languages ensures equitable access and fair treatment. It builds trust between citizens and the state, reinforcing democratic values and encouraging active civic engagement from all groups.

Politically, embracing linguistic diversity often requires decentralization or power-sharing arrangements, which can help manage ethnic and cultural differences peacefully. When linguistic minorities have a say in local governance and cultural affairs, they are more likely to feel invested in the country’s future, thus promoting harmony and reducing tensions.

Moreover, recognizing and promoting multiple languages encourages dialogue and cooperation across communities. Language becomes a bridge rather than a barrier, helping to negotiate differences and build consensus. This can lead to stronger social networks, economic collaboration, and collective problem-solving.

In essence, language diversity—when integrated thoughtfully into policy—can transform multicultural societies from fragmented groups into cohesive, resilient nations that celebrate both their unity and their differences. States that institutionalize multilingualism (Switzerland, Canada) show that well-managed linguistic rights increase trust in institutions and reduce ethnic conflict (Mady, 2012).

LANGUAGE DIVERSITY AS A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD: POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

Community Division

Although language diversity can enrich societies, it also has the potential to create social fragmentation if not managed carefully. When communities primarily associate with their own linguistic group and have limited interaction with others, it can weaken the sense of belonging to a larger national community. Language, in such cases, becomes more than just a communication tool—it turns into a symbol of separation, marking clear boundaries between groups. Residential and school segregation in Moldova reflects linguistic divisions, especially in urban Russian-speaking districts and rural Romanian-speaking regions. Limited cross-linguistic interaction weakens shared identity.

This division can lead to the emergence of parallel societies, where people live side by side but rarely engage with one another socially or culturally. Such segregation reduces opportunities for mutual understanding, collaboration, and trust-building across linguistic lines.

Belgium’s experience vividly illustrates this dynamic. The country’s linguistic split between Dutch-speaking Flanders and French-speaking Wallonia has not only fueled political friction but also complicated governance. Debates over language rights and regional autonomy have at times stalled decision-making and contributed to feelings of alienation within different communities. This situation shows how language-based divisions can undermine national unity and political stability.

Economic and Educational Barriers

Language diversity can also create significant impediments in access to essential services, education, and economic participation. Linguistic minorities who lack proficiency in the dominant language often face systemic disadvantages. In education, students who do not speak the language of instruction fluently may struggle to keep up academically, limiting their future opportunities. Without targeted support, these students risk falling behind, which can have long-lasting effects on their career prospects and social mobility.

On an economic level, language barriers can restrict job opportunities, particularly in sectors where communication skills are essential. For those from minority language backgrounds, insufficient language skills can lead to underemployment or unemployment, perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion. Additionally, limited language access to healthcare, legal services, and social programs can further marginalize these groups.

India provides a complex example, with over 20 officially recognized languages. While this reflects the country’s rich linguistic landscape, it also means that speakers of less widely used languages might face challenges in navigating government systems or participating fully in the political process. Similarly, immigrant communities across Europe and North America often

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encounter language obstacles that slow their social and economic integration. Without adequate language learning programs and support services, these barriers can reinforce inequality and hinder broader societal cohesion.

Language as a Political Tool

Language is not only a means of communication but can also become a powerful symbol of identity—and sometimes a tool for political agendas. In multilingual societies, language nationalism can emerge, where language is strongly linked to group identity and political claims. This often leads to heightened tensions as different communities struggle for recognition, rights, and power based on their language.

For example, in Quebec, the promotion and protection of French language rights have been central to debates about the province’s relationship with the rest of Canada. Language policy has played a role in fueling movements for greater autonomy and even independence, reflecting deep-rooted concerns about cultural preservation and political representation. Similarly, Catalonia’s push for recognition of Catalan language and culture is intertwined with broader aspirations for political self-determination, which has sparked significant political conflict within Spain.

In such contexts, language issues become more than cultural matters—they evolve into political flashpoints. Language policies designed to protect linguistic diversity can sometimes unintentionally exacerbate divisions if they are perceived as favoring one group over another or if they fuel identity-based grievances. This politicization of language complicates efforts to promote social integration and can destabilize political systems.

Overall, while language diversity enriches societies in many ways, it also presents complex challenges. Managing these requires careful, inclusive policies that promote interaction and understanding across linguistic groups, ensure equitable access to education and services, and prevent language from being exploited for political division. Language debates in Moldova often reflect geopolitical orientations (EU vs. post-Soviet). As shown in Gagauzia (Bodean Vozian & Soltan, 2023), linguistic issues can morph into autonomy disputes.

CASE STUDIES: LANGUAGE DIVERSITY AND MULTICULTURALISM IN PRACTICE

Canada

Canada’s official policy of bilingualism stands as a prominent example of how embracing language diversity can support multiculturalism while strengthening national unity. By recognizing both English and French as official languages, Canada ensures that citizens from both linguistic communities have equal access to government services, education, and the legal system. This approach has fostered a cultural mosaic in which various ethnic and linguistic groups coexist, each maintaining its unique cultural heritage within the broader Canadian identity.

That said, bilingualism is not without its challenges. In Quebec, for instance, there is an ongoing debate about the dominance and protection of the French language. Quebec nationalism, fueled in part by the desire to safeguard French culture, has occasionally caused tensions with English-speaking Canadians and complicated the country’s efforts to maintain a unified national identity.

Switzerland

Switzerland offers another notable example of managing language diversity within a multicultural framework. The country officially recognizes four languages—German, French, Italian, and Romansh—and has developed a federal system that grants significant autonomy to linguistic minorities. This decentralized governance allows communities to preserve their cultural identities while contributing to the overall political stability and unity of the nation.

However, linguistic diversity in Switzerland also brings challenges, especially in urban centers where different language groups live close to each other but may have limited social

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interaction. The ongoing task is to ensure that multilingualism acts as a bridge fostering cooperation and integration, rather than creating further divisions between communities.

India

India is one of the world's most linguistically diverse countries, with more than 1,600 languages spoken across its vast territory. Its constitution recognizes 22 official languages, reflecting this rich linguistic landscape. Yet, this diversity has sometimes led to tensions, especially regarding the promotion of Hindi as the national language. Periodic language riots and political movements advocating for the recognition of regional languages have posed challenges to national unity.

Despite these difficulties, India's linguistic variety has enriched its cultural and political life, allowing for vibrant regional identities and expressions. The central challenge lies in striking a balance between promoting a common national language and preserving the country's many regional languages.

South Africa

South Africa's post-apartheid constitution recognizes 11 official languages, making it one of Africa's most linguistically diverse countries. Multilingualism has been a cornerstone of the country's efforts to build an inclusive and equitable society following decades of racial segregation. The official recognition of multiple languages has empowered historically marginalized communities to reclaim and celebrate their cultural identities.

However, South Africa still faces practical challenges, such as allocating resources fairly and ensuring equal access to education and public services for all linguistic groups. Balancing these needs remains an ongoing process, particularly for languages spoken by smaller populations.

These cases offer benchmarks for Moldova: decentralization, strong minority-language institutions, and balanced bilingualism are effective strategies.

MOLDOVA: NAVIGATING LANGUAGE DIVERSITY AND MULTICULTURALISM

Moldova presents a complex case where language diversity intersects with multiculturalism amid political and social tensions. The country's linguistic landscape is characterized primarily by Romanian and Russian speakers, along with smaller communities speaking Gagauz, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, and other minority languages. Language plays a critical role in Moldova's national identity and political discourse. Romanian is the official state language, symbolizing the country's cultural heritage and European aspirations. However, Russian remains widely used, especially in urban areas and among minority groups, reflecting ongoing geopolitical influences. This duality creates both opportunities and challenges for social cohesion.

On the one hand, Moldova's linguistic diversity enriches its cultural life, allowing different communities to maintain their distinct traditions and languages. Educational policies have aimed to promote bilingualism, offering instruction in Romanian and Russian to accommodate the country's diverse population. This approach has the potential to foster mutual understanding and inclusion if implemented effectively.

On the other hand, language issues have at times deepened divisions. The status of the Russian language and its role in public life is a sensitive topic, often linked to political and ethnic identities. In the autonomous region of Gagauzia, for example, language and cultural rights are central to local identity and political autonomy, illustrating how language policy is deeply intertwined with governance and minority rights.

Furthermore, Moldova faces challenges in balancing language education and ensuring access to quality instruction across linguistic communities. Disparities in language proficiency can impact economic opportunities and social mobility, particularly in rural areas and among minority groups.

Overall, Moldova's experience highlights the delicate balance required in managing language diversity within a multicultural society. Effective language policies that promote respect,

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inclusion, and equitable access to education and public services are essential for building national unity and fostering peaceful coexistence among its diverse linguistic communities.

Moldova’s linguistic dynamics involve:

- Romanian as the official language and symbol of European integration.
- Russian as a functional lingua franca in trade, urban life, and media.
- Minority languages (Gagauz, Bulgarian, Ukrainian, Romani) with limited domains and varying degrees of institutional support.

Empirical issues identified in policy reports include:

- ✓ inconsistent Romanian proficiency among minority communities (CoE, 2019);
- ✓ disparities in educational materials in minority languages (CREDO);
- ✓ lack of early childhood bilingual support programs;
- ✓ political polarization tied to language amendments (ConstitutionNet, 2021).

Thus, Moldova’s system reflects both linguistic richness and structural inequalities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING MULTICULTURAL INTEGRATION IN MOLDOVA

Promote Inclusive Language Education Policies

One of the most effective ways to foster multicultural integration in Moldova is through inclusive and balanced language education. Schools should provide high-quality instruction in both Romanian (the official state language) and Russian, alongside support for minority languages such as Gagauz and Ukrainian where appropriate. This bilingual or even multilingual education approach can help bridge linguistic divides and equip students with the skills needed to engage fully in all aspects of Moldovan society.

Investing in teacher training, developing culturally sensitive curricula, and ensuring equal access to educational resources across regions—urban and rural alike—will be critical. Encouraging early childhood bilingual education can build a foundation for mutual understanding and respect among Moldova’s diverse communities.

Strengthen Intercultural Dialogue and Community Engagement

Creating platforms for intercultural dialogue is essential to break down stereotypes and foster social cohesion. Government agencies, NGOs, and local communities should collaborate to organize cultural events, workshops, and public forums where people from different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds can share their traditions, languages, and experiences.

These initiatives can promote empathy, reduce mistrust, and encourage active participation in civic life. Supporting local media and cultural institutions that highlight multicultural stories can further contribute to a shared sense of belonging and appreciation for Moldova’s diversity.

Ensure Equal Access to Public Services in Multiple Languages

To build trust and inclusivity, public services—such as healthcare, legal aid, and administrative support—should be accessible in both Romanian and Russian, with accommodations for minority languages where possible. Clear communication in citizens’ preferred languages ensures that no group feels excluded or marginalized.

Training public service workers in multilingual communication and cultural sensitivity will improve the quality of interactions and service delivery. This inclusive approach also helps prevent social and economic exclusion that can arise from language barriers.

Promote Language Rights within a Framework of National Unity

Moldova’s language policies should balance the recognition of linguistic diversity with the promotion of a unified national identity. This means respecting minority language rights while emphasizing common values and shared citizenship.

Legislators can support inclusive narratives that emphasize the nation's multicultural background as a strength rather than a cause of conflict. Minority populations can be reassured

that their identities are respected inside the Moldovan state via official acknowledgment of minority languages and effective steps to encourage their preservation.

Invest in Multilingual Media and Communication Platforms

A significant influence on how the general public views multiculturalism is the media. Supporting multilingual media outlets—radio, television, internet platforms—that provide news and cultural content in Romanian, Russian, and minority languages helps create greater understanding and information sharing. By combating false information and racial stereotypes, balanced media representation fosters a more informed and unified society.

Encourage Political Inclusion and Representation of Linguistic Minorities

Sustainable multicultural integration requires that minority linguistic groups be meaningfully represented in political and decision-making processes. Political organizations ought to set up procedures that allow minority opinions to be heard and taken into account when it comes to issues of language, education, and culture. This collaborative strategy lowers the possibility that linguistic issues may escalate into more significant political disputes and fosters confidence in state institutions. Implementing these suggestions will enable Moldova to use its language diversity as a means of fostering greater social inclusion and national cohesion. The peaceful and productive development of Moldova's multicultural society will be facilitated by well-considered, inclusive language policies, community involvement, and fair access to services.

CONCLUSION

Language diversity presents both opportunities and difficulties for multicultural societies. It contributes to cultural richness, helps sustain minority languages, and fosters inclusion, yet it can also lead to social fragmentation, reinforce inequality, and hinder the development of a unified national identity. To navigate these complexities, policymakers must implement inclusive language strategies that promote unity, support minority language communities, and acknowledge cultural and linguistic variety.

As global demographic shifts accelerate, the link between language diversity and multiculturalism will grow increasingly significant. The central challenge will be to leverage the benefits of linguistic diversity to enhance multicultural cohesion while minimizing its potential to divide.

Language diversity in Moldova is both an asset and a challenge. The analysis demonstrates that multilingualism enriches cultural heritage, supports minority identities, and enhances societal resilience. Yet structural inequalities in education, employment, and political representation persist, particularly for speakers of Russian and minority languages. Balanced, evidence-based language policies are essential to ensure that Moldova's multilingualism strengthens rather than fragments its social fabric.

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