

The Weaponization of Language in Irregular Warfare: Moldova, a Case Study

Description

Three documents released by US President Joe Biden's administration in 2022 highlight the significance of integrated deterrence: the [U.S. National Defense Strategy](#), [Nuclear Posture Review](#), and [Missile Defense Review](#). Indeed, integrated deterrence reflects the primary way the Department of Defense (DoD) pursues its goal of national defense: with the coherent application of US, allied, and partner instruments of national power in pursuit of mutual national interest. Within this direction, allies and partners take on a more nuanced role, something relevant to the irregular warfare (IW) enterprise. This approach further requires that in addition to conventional interoperability, the allied IW enterprise focuses resources on better understanding, engaging, and leveraging regional and socio-cultural capabilities, understanding the human terrain in which the US and its allies and partners will have to potentially operate.

The Russian Federation is known to be very skillful in leveraging asymmetries to its advantage, and Russia's use of IW through its operations in the Republic of Moldova is a perfect example. While not obvious to the unfamiliar eye, Moscow, both under Soviet and post-Soviet rule, has used IW to achieve its strategic aims. In the case of Republic of Moldova, the goal is to keep Moldovan capital Chişinău under Russian influence while simultaneously deepening divides between Moldova, Ukraine, and Romania. These efforts are designed to prevent Moldova's accession to the EU and integration into Western institutions and ultimately to undermine the rules-based international order.

In exerting influence in Europe, the Russian Federation executes IW according to its own doctrine. The full-scale conflict in Ukraine provides us with a wealth of lessons in military art, a central one being that IW is an important component of the conflict spectrum, albeit approached and executed differently by near-peer competitors. Commentary and analysis tends to agree that when Russian forces invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022, they did so according to a [well-established playbook](#). Proposed solutions, however, converge towards a [focus on conventional capabilities and force structure](#), leaving out core issues relevant to the post-Soviet space, including the history and socio-cultural traits of the local populace. IW is the focal point of this current conflict and it is as important to develop and integrate IW capabilities as much as conventional forces. This article explores one example of how language is weaponized to attain strategic and geopolitical goals.

Russia's De-Romanization Tactics

The Russian Federation continued to engage asymmetrically after the fall of the USSR and most times used Soviet methods, only updating them to the present operational environment. The case of [de-Romanization](#) and the weaponization of the Romanian/Moldovan language in both Ukraine and Moldova is the reverse of what Russia has done to establish and protect its own identity: destroy the essence of an ethnic group (in this case, the Romanians), deport them, take away religious freedoms and education rights, and then leverage this in order to sow hate and fear by blaming it on someone else (in the Moldovan case, on Ukraine). Conversely, Moscow justified the annexation of Crimea and other strategic choices by [evoking the concept of Russian World](#) (Russkiy Mir). The essence of [Russkiy Mir](#) is to protect Russian identity, values, tradition and language from alleged attackers, i.e, the collective West. This method is very powerful because it is not limited by borders: de-Romanization was applied in the artificially constructed Republic of Moldova as much as in Ukraine.

It is not the first time Moscow has used such methods. The [Soviet deportations of ethnic Romanians from Bassarabia and Northern Bukovina](#) (present day Republic of Moldova and areas of Ukraine) first took place between late 1940 and 1951 and were part of Joseph Stalin's policy of political repression of any potential opposition to Soviet power. The Romanian population in the occupied territories of Bassarabia, Northern Bukovina, and the Herăa region (illegally annexed following the [German Russian Ribbentrop-Molotov non-aggression pact](#)) were a continuous threat for the Soviet dictator and his regime because they represented a constant potentiality of re-unification with Romania and resistance against Soviet oppression and communism. Similarly, today, Moscow is working to encourage any de-Romanization laws and behaviors as it continues to try to destroy the Ukrainian nation. After the fall of the USSR, the Russian Federation carried the torch of the Soviet Union's asymmetric engagement in Eastern Europe, including de-Romanization through the weaponization of the Romanian/Moldovan language. Moldavian is a [dialect of Romanian](#). It is written identically, and Moldova and Romania share the same literary language. The standard alphabet used in Moldova is identical to the Romanian alphabet, which uses the Latin script, not Cyrillic.

The pre- and post-Soviet de-Romanization projects in Ukraine and Moldova have produced glaring departures from historical fact, an alternative reality employed in fighting IW. According to the last Ukrainian population census dating back to 2001, Romanians constitute the third-largest ethnic group (after Ukrainians and Russians) in Ukraine: a total of 409,608 people, or 0.85% (of which 258,619 or 0.53% are Moldovans and 150,989 or 0.32% are Romanians) of the population. Nonetheless, the circumstances of these Romanians in Ukraine are complicated, for historical, political and, more recently, geopolitical reasons. The Soviet period allowed, for example, university exams in Romanian (which was then purposely called Moldavian) in some sections of Cernăuți.

Surprisingly (because it was during the Soviet rule), the Gorbachev period was the most beneficial for the ethnic Romanians of Ukraine. The struggle for recognition was supported by foreign contributors, and elementary schools and high schools were opened (for example: in the Cernăuți region alone, five more schools were added to the 87 already in existence). Between 1991 and 1992, in all Romanian-speaking regions, the Romanian language was removed and by the end of the 1990s, the process of de-Romanization resumed. In 1998, the Romanian language remained in the Cernăuți and Maramureș regions, but in Odessa and Bugeac it was switched to [the Soviet artificial construct of “Moldavian language”](#). This occurred administratively and tacitly, without an official statement or any request from parents or students. It was gradual and silent. The Russia-friendly regimes installed in Ukraine and Moldova helped Moscow, rather than the population. In 1998, Ukrainians began to change how they referred to the “Moldavian” dialect. It became “Romanian language (Moldavian language),” then by 1999, the “Moldovan language (Romanian language),” after which it was reduced to “Moldovan language.” Again, all this occurred without any requests to change the language of instruction in schools. Everything was done administratively, without any written, legal basis. This is representative of the power of IW and Russian influence. In 2010, after the Orange Revolution of 2004-2005, the situation continued, culminating with the [Education Law of 2017](#), followed by the language law and the recent [minorities law of December 2022](#). Meanwhile, [Chișinău officially declared](#) that all learning processes in the Republic of Moldova should be done in Romanian, and the official transition to “Romanian language” and the amendment of the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova makes unnecessary and inexplicable any insistence for maintaining the Soviet narrative of the “Moldovan language.”

Thus, [the so-called “Moldovan language,” a Soviet creation](#) initiated on Oct. 12, 1924, to artificially produce a so-called Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic as a counter to the reunification of [Bessarabia](#) with Romania, became an effective weapon in Russian IW against Moldova, Ukraine, Europe, and, implicitly the rules based order. This was IW at its finest.

The Russian IW Playbook

The Russian IW playbook is precisely tailored to the target populace. In the Moldova-Romania-Ukraine region, Russia’s weaponization of the Romanian language is a means to pursue its strategic goal of controlling and manipulating both the population and the international community. By rebranding the Romanian language as “Moldovan,” Russia impeded Moldova from pursuing a European path and simultaneously tried to sabotage Romanian-Ukrainian relations. Weaponizing the language created internal discord between ethnic Russians and Romanians and fueled mistrust in the Union and its institutions. The Western values of the rules-based order to respect the rights and freedoms of all minorities was subliminally replaced with messaging that the “Moldovan identity” would lose

sovereignty. This in turn created deeper division between ethnic Romanians and Ukrainians through language differences, and Russia frustrated Ukraine's European Union (EU) integration process. By perpetuating fake narratives and making false accusations, Russia also hid its expansionist goals. Russian propagation of the fake narrative that Romania is looking to reunify with Moldova reflects absurdity in the face of reality: Romania supports not only Ukraine in its fight for state survival but also Moldova in its bid for EU membership. Romania also remains a staunch North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally and security provider for the Euro-Atlantic space, especially in the Black Sea. On his recent visit to Romania, president Volodymyr Zelenskyy made it a point to thank Romania for its military and humanitarian assistance.

Russia's perpetuation and formalization of the Soviet-style distinction between the ethnonyms Romanian and "Moldovan" (not recognized by Romania) and the glottonyms Romanian language and "Moldovan language" (recognized by neither Romania nor Moldova), a clear IW mechanism, is mirrored in the Russian world, where the Russian language and culture are protected from an alleged attack from the collective West. Originally, the distinction, both linguistic and ethnic, between Romanian and "Moldovan" was administrative. After the emergence of the USSR, all Romanian speakers who had been previously part of the Tsarist Empire were called "Moldovans," and those who had been part of the Austro-Hungarian or Habsburg Empire were called "Romanians." Hence the paradox that, for example, the first post-independence Moldovan prime minister, Mircea Druc, was "Romanian," because he was originally from Cernăuți, while the rest of the population was made up of "Moldovans" who had been part of the Tsarist and later Soviet Empire. Unfortunately, the distinction was perpetuated in Kyiv after Ukraine's independence for strategic reasons. If the two minorities, namely the Romanian and the "Moldovan" were put together, they would become the country's second-largest minority ethnic group after the Russians, and possibly obtain more significant rights (for example education and religious right) and even certain political advantages (more formal political representation). Separately, however, they ranked fifth and eighth, respectively, among minority group populations.

Nevertheless, this mechanism has its disadvantages. Most saliently, it produces anti-Ukrainian sentiment and feeds into Russian propaganda across Europe. In Germany, for instance, [a new political party](#) ran with a platform opposing support for Ukraine. The same strategy applied: use anti-Ukrainian propaganda in order to advance the Russian agenda. Remember, this kind of IW is not limited by borders. It is socio-cultural. Another mechanism emphasizes the denial of the Romanian population's "native population" (autochthonous) status in Ukraine, which would have protected it from recent unfavorable legislative changes.

A final mechanism, with major effects in the medium- and long-term, is the 2017 Education Law passed during the Poroshenko presidency. Ukraine implemented the law without the consent of the [Venice Commission](#) and despite contestations by Bucharest authorities for violating European norms regarding ethnic minorities. Practically, the situation of Romanians in Ukraine, under the codices of a drastic education law, became difficult. For the medium- and long-term, only diminished mechanisms exist for preserving Romanian national identity. There is no registered Romanian church that could facilitate the preservation of the socio-cultural and religious traditions of the several hundred thousand Romanians/Moldovans in Ukraine. Practically, the Romanian minority, unable to obtain Romanian citizenship because Ukraine only permits one citizenship, will enter a period of pronounced decline.

Conclusions for the IW Enterprise

Modern warfare will rely heavily on IW, which can be a cornerstone of effective integrated deterrence. Given that the European theater still relies heavily on the US security guarantee, the US IW enterprise must be leveraged. Effective IW also requires the United States to rely heavily on its allies. To construct a truly credible integrated deterrence framework, American planners will need to prioritize multinational engagements to first understand and then counter localized Russian IW techniques. The Russian IW playbook that focuses on people, stokes social divisiveness, exacerbates identity politics, and drives legal expedencies will attain Russian goals if left unchecked. For US integrated deterrence to succeed vis-à-vis Russia, allied European nations must shape the environment to protect the rules-based order and counter artificial realities. Western democratic, multicultural, and pluralistic societies function only when all peoples have equal rights and opportunities. An essential component of IW in Europe is understanding how to protect both.

The existing US IW enterprise can significantly contribute to the conventional component of deterrence. Expanding IW knowledge and skill also requires collaboration with the Europeans. In the case of the weaponization of the Romanian language, understanding the socio-cultural, historical, and religious dimensions of the pre- and post-Soviet project of de-Romanization can substantially aid in demolishing anti-Western influence campaigns across Europe and even in the United States. Truly understanding these IW mechanisms would mend [deficiencies in US capabilities to engage effectively](#) both in conventional and unconventional ways. US Special Operations Command and the US intelligence community may help provide a foundation for such measures.

As US Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced in 2008, the West will not succeed in integrated deterrence until it “displays a mastery of irregular warfare comparable to that which [it possesses] in conventional combat.” As the issue of Russia’s weaponization of the Romanian/Moldovan language reveals, there remains much the United States has yet to learn in IW. Still, implementing IW with localized European assistance and building on existing Special Operations relationships will take

the United States a step further on the long road toward IW mastery and establishing a more secure Europe.

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Main photo: Soldiers from the North Carolina and Alabama National Guard join their Moldovan and Romanian peers at the opening ceremony for Operation Fire Shield 2019 hosted by Moldova, Sept. 16 at Bulboaca Training Area, Moldova. Here, a Moldovan Soldier raises the Moldovan Flag as a Romanian soldier and a U.S. Army Soldier render honors.

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