

Pandemic Fires Hate Speech in Moldova

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[Madalin Necsutu](#)

Chisinau

for [Balkaninsight.com](#)

The COVID-19 outbreak has worsened divisive and irresponsible public discourse in Moldova, an expert monitoring hate speech from Promo-LEX organisation tells BIRN in an interview.

Hate speech and irresponsible language by politicians, clerics and journalists has worsened in Moldova as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, aggravating xenophobia and internal divisions, the human rights organisation Promo-LEX – which has been monitoring the phenomenon for years – says.

The trends are also worrying, its expert in charge of the monitoring process, Irina Corobcenco, told BIRN in an interview. “This type of speech is a problem, and the competent authorities must take measures to prevent and tackle it,” she said.

She adds that people need to become “aware of the seriousness of hate speech, which is dangerous because it causes coalitions of one group against another person or another group, and is built on prejudices, stereotypes, conflicts or tensions that it exploits or amplifies.

“Hate speech is the stage that is followed by hate crimes and genocide,” she warns.

Irresponsible public language was evident from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, she notes, recalling how on March 7 Prime Minister Ion Chicu blamed the first infection case in Moldova on a 48-year-old woman who had flown home from Milan.

“In this case, we have proof of total irresponsibility; that person endangered the health of several people, including the Italian airport, the aircraft and our [citizens],” Chicu said at the time. The next day, President Igor Dodon revealed the name, sex, age and other details of the woman, breaking privacy law in order to focus popular outrage on her.

But after recovering, the same woman on April 9 told Jurnal TV station that the allegations were untrue, and that she never contracted COVID-19. “Nothing said on TV was true, especially Mr Dodon and Mr Chicu,” she said.

She said she lost her job and home after the Italian woman she worked for dropped her services after she got sick and went to the hospital. The doctors in Italy had diagnosed pneumonia and told her to rest, after which, using her last savings, she bought a plane ticket back to Moldova.

Dynamic accelerated started before the pandemic:

Corobcenco said hate speech has been on the rise in the country before the COVID pandemic hit the country in 2020. “The number of cases in 2019 was 2.2 times higher than in 2018, and they were registered mainly in a political and religious context,” she recalled.



The human rights activist Irina Corobcenco speaking during a training session. Photo: Personal archive

In 2018, over six months of monitoring, from February to August, 368 cases of hate speech and incitement to discrimination were identified. In 2019, over seven months of monitoring, from January to April and from August to November, Promo-LEX identified 835 cases of hate speech.

In 2018 and 2019, the monitoring process was conducted by five to seven observers contracted by Promo-LEX. Since 2020, it has been done by six people, four of whom are volunteers who graduated from a program called PromoTE.

Monitoring is based on a methodology that involves looking at media sources online, on TV, on social networks and on cyber platforms for storing and distributing information.

Observers pay close attention to public events, statements of public figures, politicians and religious figures.

Since the second half of 2019, Promo-LEX has also monitored sessions of the Moldovan parliament.

“Basically, if there were an average of two cases of hate speech per day in 2018, the number reached an average of 4.2 cases per day in 2019. In 2020, the monitoring process is still running, and data have not yet been analyzed,” she added.

Those most affected by hate speech during the pandemic are often members of the Moldovan diaspora living in the West, she continued.

“After declaring the state of emergency [on March 17] there were several cases of hate speech in relation to the diaspora, to people infected/affected by COVID-19, politicians, their supporters and to the Roma community,” she said.

About one million Moldovans live abroad, split almost equally between Europe and North America, and the Russian Federation, out of 2.7 million in total. Their political views are also split, between loyalties to West and East.

As the pro-Russian Socialist Party has little support among the Western diaspora, the media affiliated with them and their deputies in parliament have often used hate speech against them in the context of the elections, and now in the context of the pandemic, Corobcenco asserted.

Press briefings organised by the authorities routinely separate “foreign” cases of COVID-19 infection from “internal” ones, stigmatizing the former. One example of this was provided by the [reply](#) of Socialist deputy Bogdan Tirdea to another deputy on April 8 on TV 8 channel, when Tirdea accused former speaker Andrian Candu of planning “to bring Moldovans sick with COVID to Moldova”.

On April 1, the Moldovan Ombudsman, Mihail Cotorobai, expressed concern about the aggressive messages being sent to and about the Moldovan diaspora in the context of the pandemic.

“Politicians are affected also by hate speech in the context of the pandemic ... the hate speech generated by politicians refers to other politicians, usually their opponents. And hate speech against politicians is also generated from outside the country,” Corobcenco told BIRN.

She added that the pages of social networks abound in images that picture Moldovan politicians associated with COVID-19 and beyond.

During the period April 6-10, after monitoring 22 online sources and their Facebook pages, Promo-LEX found that in the case of 17 online sources, 183 news items about COVID-19 had generated 445 comments of hatred and incitement to hatred or discrimination.

Better legal framework is needed:

Corobcenco told BIRN that Moldova does not have a proper legal framework to stop or punish hate speech.

“We need a relevant legal framework for the prevention and sanctioning of hate speech ... Draft law no 301/2016 on crimes motivated by prejudice must be adopted in the second reading by parliament,” she said.



*Moldovan deputies in the Parliament waiting to vote laws.
Photo: EPA/Doru Dumitru*

However, deputies have so far shown little interest in adopting a new law regulating hate speech in the country.

The expert also calls for a national strategy, which would bring together the authorities, civil society and the media in order to create and implement long-term actions to prevent hate speech.

A big role in reducing this phenomenon should be carried out by media, she said.

“This pandemic has brought to attention the ease with which hate speech is used by both public actors and citizens, without taking into account the fact that it directly or indirectly affects all citizens in the country,” she concluded.