

RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN THE CIS (2022–2024): NARRATIVES, TOOLS, AND REGIONAL RESPONSES POST-UKRAINE INVASION

Firdavs Azimqulov

International Relations University of World Economy and Diplomacy

E-mail: firdavs.azimqulov@icloud.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3063-2438>

Abstract

Following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia intensified its strategic communication efforts toward the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to preserve regional influence amid growing geopolitical isolation. This paper investigates how the Kremlin constructed and disseminated narratives between 2022 and 2024 to shape perceptions. Drawing on Constructivist theory, the study emphasizes the role of identity, memory, and discourse in Russia's foreign policy communication, focusing on tools such as state-backed media, official rhetoric, historical symbolism, and bilateral diplomatic engagement. The paper contributes to understanding how state-led communication operates as a tool of influence and how identity politics shapes regional responses in the post-Ukraine war context.

Introduction

“Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.” – George Orwell

On February 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin released his public video address that announced Russia's conduct of a “special military operation” on Ukrainian soil.¹ In the international and Western media, it was accepted with harsh condemnation and portrayed as Russia launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.² As consumers of both Russia's and Western media conglomerates, the event and its following actions disrupted its relations with members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Western countries, somehow scared of Russia's sudden political move, have cut ties with Russia altogether by drowning the country with sanctions and putting it in an isolated position. As a result, this threatened or impeded Russia's influence in the region tied to Moscow through trade routes, security agreements, and shared history. In order to uphold its leadership in the CIS states and related regions, Russia augmented its communication strategies throughout 2022 and 2024. Moscow, ever since it commenced deployment of military personnel it has been using carefully crafted narratives and tools such as state media, official speeches, historical symbols, and diplomacy. This paper

¹ TASS. (2022, February 24). Putin declares beginning of military operation in Ukraine. TASS. <https://tass.com/politics/1409329>

² United Nations. (2022, February 23). Russian Federation announces ‘special military operation’ in Ukraine as Security Council meets in eleventh-hour effort to avoid full-scale conflict. Meetings Coverage and Press Releases. <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14803.doc.htm>

examines how Russia adapted its communication strategies between 2022 and 2024 to preserve its regional influence after the Ukraine invasion. This research is guided by the following question: How did Russia's strategic communication toward the eight members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (excluding Russia itself) evolve from 2022 to 2024, and what narratives and tools shaped its efforts to maintain influence in the region following the invasion of Ukraine? To back the research with one of the IR theories, we will be employing constructivism. Through a constructivist approach, we can shed light on the centrality of identity, shared history, and normative discourse in Russia's communication strategies. After 2022, Russia tried to strengthen its ties with CIS countries by promoting a shared identity, based on common history and culture, and by warning against the West, portraying it as a source of instability. Russia presented itself as the protector of a distinct Eurasian civilization to make CIS states feel closer to Moscow. The study not only examines the narratives Russia used (like anti-Western messages) but also looks at the tools and methods it used to spread these ideas, including media, diplomacy, and online platforms. Overall, the research aims to show how Russia adapted its strategies to maintain influence in the region amid the changing geopolitical situation after the Ukraine invasion. This analysis was conducted due to the noteworthy evolution of Russia's strategic communication from 2022 to 2024. When the war started as a "special military operation" (SMO) in 2022, Russia's main focus was disseminating defensive narratives. Those narratives could be that Russia's justification for invading Ukrainian regions was NATO's aggressive expansion towards its country or cleansing and liberating Ukraine from neo-Nazism. In subsequent years (in 2023-2024), Russia's discourses shifted to a broader scope. The narratives say that identity has been the main factor, and they also emphasise multipolarity over Western dominance.

Russia employed various tools, including state-backed media outlets like RT, TASS, and Channel 1; speeches by political figures; warlike symbols like WWII commemorations; and diplomatic efforts, such as CIS summits and official visits to member states. These methods are used to boost Russia's influence. The scope of the analysis covers only eight CIS member states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Turkmenistan is only an associate member, thus, it was excluded from the analysis as Russia's own domestic territory. Moreover, in order to keep the focus on Moscow's efforts, the analysis conveys solely Russia's narratives and tools, not the CIS states' responses. When it comes to methodology, the study uses qualitative discourse analysis to examine Russia's communication.

Theoretical Framework. Constructivism is particularly suited because Russia's all strategic communication tools, narratives are all ideas of some kind. For example, diplomatic visits to CIS states by Vladimir Putin or Sergey Lavrov create a shared identity as partner states. Other alternative theories overlook conceptual, narrative-based ways to explain the situation. Realism, for instance, puts a high value on material power and would draw attention to Russia's military connections with Belarus or its energy exports to Central Asia. However, these were impeded by sanctions from 2022 to 2024. Although the liberal idea of "soft power" has a

somewhat cultural affiliation, Russia's deceptive strategies, such as disinformation, are more in line with constructivism's theory of controversial contexts. Russia may be framed as an imperial power by postcolonial theory, but it ignores modern communication dynamics like digital media. Constructivism offers a better framework for examining the development and shaping of Russia's strategies because of its focus on how people are defined and how language is used to create and change social reality.

Russia uses disinformation, a key component of its overall information warfare strategy, in competition and conflict due to its effectiveness in achieving tactical and strategic results. Before Russia's operations in Ukraine, Vladimir Medinsky (Putin's adviser on history and one of the first negotiators with Ukraine) rewrote history textbooks in favor of Russia's national interests, which gave a non-Western interpretation of the Ukraine war.³ Right around Putin's big speech in February 2022, another influential figure, Sergey Karaganov, who leads a major pro-government think tank, published a long research paper explaining how justifiable the invasion is and gave interviews.⁴ These two figures helped shape the main messages that Russian state media used to support the war.

The Russian Government has used historical stories to justify its actions and make the regime seem more legitimate. One way this is done is through state-run television. In the first three months after the SOP, Russian state TV, especially channels like *Channel 1* and *Rossiya*, focused mostly on talk shows about the war, with short news updates in between. Three shows in particular, *The Great Game* (Channel 1), *60 Minutes*, and *Soloviev Live* (both on *Rossiya*), took up most of the airtime and became key tools in spreading pro-war messages to the public. In Russia, people often talk about a "collective West" as a group of Western countries. Today's Russian identity stories are like older ones, seeing the West as Russia's main rival, but sometimes part of Russia's own identity. This dual role helps justify Russia's actions by saying they are a response to Western pressure or aggression. Calling it the *collective* West makes it seem like the entire Western world is united against Russia.

Russia often uses history or legacy in a misleading way (*historical revisionism*) when giving aid to other countries. In Central Asia, for example, Russia presents its aid to countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan not as part of a new, equal partnership, but as a continuation of its old role as a "big brother."⁵ This echoes the Soviet-era idea that Russia was helping or guiding the region, rather than dominating it. This shows that Russia's foreign aid is not only about helping others. It's also about promoting itself as a global power and maintaining control in what it sees as its rightful *sphere of influence*. These aims have become even more noticeable in how Russia gives aid, especially after 2022. Promoting the Russian language is a regular

³ Faulconbridge, G. (2023, August 10). Kremlin aide rewrites Russian history for a society at war. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kremlin-aide-rewrites-russian-history-society-war-2023-08-10/>

⁴ S. Karaganov for Corriere della Sera: «We are at war with the West. The European security order is illegitimate». (2022, April 8). Sergey Karaganov. <https://karaganov.ru/en/s-karaganov-for-corriere-della-sera-we-are-at-war-with-the-west-the-european-security-order-is-illegitimate/>

⁵ Koldomasov, A. (2025, February 22). The Myth of Russia's "friendship within the nations": How telegram destroys it. Unknown. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/389273648_The_Myth_of_Russia's_Friendship_Within_the_Nations_How_Telegram_Destroy_It

part of Russia's foreign aid, especially in Central Asia. This includes things like training teachers, donating Russian-language books, and running summer schools. These efforts are not just cultural, because they have a geopolitical purpose of keeping the Russian language alive in the region and maintaining Moscow's influence. In 2023, Russia updated its development aid strategy and made higher education a central part of it. This includes offering government-funded places at Russian state universities for foreign students. After graduating, some of these students may work with Russian embassies in their home countries through alumni networks, influenced by Russian soft power and spreading pro-Russian messages as part of public diplomacy or propaganda.

Moreover, although most of the global internet search engines originated and are run by Western states, with the US taking the lead (Google, Bing, Yahoo owning 95% of the engine market share worldwide), Russia is the only country among the CIS members with its own fully-functioning search engine. Yandex has been popular for quite some time and is still competitive in trying to keep up the pace with Microsoft's Bing in the number of users. Therefore, Russia's Yandex can be a significant strategic communication tool at its disposal and easily accomplish reaching out to the public or altering their perspectives when it starts relating to Russia in some way. To say empirically, Yandex, besides Russia, is quite popular in Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Uzbekistan. In Belarus and Kazakhstan, one person out of every five has been using Yandex as a search engine, with Uzbekistan having only around 10% of the whole population in 2019. According to latest data of whole period of 2024, the average relative usage numbers of Yandex among search engines still hold enough portion and even sharply risen: Uzbekistan 23%, Belarus 36%, Azerbaijan 13%, Kazakhstan 31.8%, Tajikistan 29.5%, Kyrgyzstan 15%, Armenia 8.7%, Moldova 7%. Stipulating from this data, we can clearly see why Russia hadn't left the platform unchecked, given its potential power in shaping public opinion. One way to see that is by acknowledging how search engines can choose which websites will appear at the top of the search results list.

Additionally, Russia possesses another strategic communication tool and skillfully utilizes it in favor of the country's national interests. That is his own social media platform - VKontakte, which has been widely used by CIS members (from at least some states, 300K to Kazakhstan with 7 million users).⁶ Hence, VKontakte, which also owns Odnoklassniki, has been blamed several times for supporting politics, elections to become impartial. After the SOP addressing the activity of Russia in those platforms doubled and started to hold over 40% global activity of VKontakte after a couple of months.

Each paragraph below details Russia's narratives for one CIS member state, starting with Uzbekistan, highlighting their evolution and strategic intent.

Uzbekistan

TV news channels are still the main way for most Russian citizens to get information about current events. Most people in Uzbekistan get their news from Russian media as well, because

⁶ Statcounter Global Stats - Browser, OS, Search Engine including Mobile Usage Share. (n.d.). StatCounter Global Stats. Retrieved May 10, 2025, from <https://gs.statcounter.com>

Russian is the country's second most spoken language. Since Russia's declaration video of the special military operation released on 24th February, 2025, Russia's social media accounts have been filled with posts of how the country is obeying international law when it commenced the SOP. Furthermore, it is not just Western countries that decided to be cautious against Russia because of its military manoeuvres, but Central Asian states as well.⁷ Moreover, fanning the flames of fear or anger, in one incident, Russia's politician Zakhar Prilepin proposed to make Uzbekistan (indirectly Kazakhstan as well) officially one of Russia's territories, basically invading the territory.⁸ Post-Ukraine invasion, Russia has been continuing to shape its role as the protector of the CA states from the unstable neighbor, Afghanistan. It has been obvious since the 5+1 format meeting with Russia or in other multilateral meetings, Sergey Lavrov has kept addressing to cooperate with CA states against terrorist-extremist groups, stating that Afghanistan will be prominent in their discussions and Tashkent will be the main place to discuss it. Russia, through CIS Foreign Ministers meetings, has been striving to uphold the influence of the organization on member states, for example, on 13 May 2022, S. Lavrov announced they will be increasing the scope of CIS by opening a new field branch in Uzbekistan.⁹ Also on April 14, he took part in the CIS Foreign Ministers Council Meeting in Samarkand and explicitly condemned Western states for interference in CIS countries' domestic affairs.¹⁰ Russia proceeded with holding, actively participating in diplomatic talks and summits with CIS member states, somehow to exhibit an image of political partnership with them against the West; on the other hand, Russia expanded its media channels' geographical scope to reach more Russophone people. It became evident in Uzbekistan as well: at the end of 2022, Uzbekistan saw growth in the number of its foreign TV channels, and despite the amount being fourfold, half of them were Russian media outlets.¹¹ Russia's one of the main non-TV channels that is widely popular in CIS states, with 174'000 subscribers - Sputnik has been active in spreading Russia's side of the story in the Russia-Ukraine war. For example, on 27th February - just several days after the war started - Sputnik stated: *"the Ukrainian Navy Command has officially confirmed Zelensky's lie. The soldiers from Zmeiny Island are alive and in captivity, the Ukrainian Navy reports on Facebook. President Zelensky had previously claimed that all Ukrainian marines and border guards had died, for which he even awarded them posthumously."*¹² Furthermore, anomalously cold weather had a significant effect on Uzbekistan, so the government decided to supply its demands with Russian gas in 2023¹³, and leaders of countries' official meetings in Moscow regarding that matter and the events were widely aired by media channels. Moreover, Russia was active in countering the

⁷ Kobilov, F. (2024). Uzbekistan-Russia relations in light of leadership change and the Ukrainian War. Russian Analytical Digest, 310.

⁸ kun.uz. (2023, December 21). Russia's chauvinist official proposes joining Uzbekistan's territory to RF; Uzbek MP hits back. Kun.Uz. <https://kun.uz/en/news/2023/12/21/russias-chauvinist-official-proposes-joining-uzbekistans-territory-to-rf-uzbek-mp-hits-back>

⁹ <https://mid.ru/en/maps/uz/1813294/>

¹⁰ <https://mid.ru/en/maps/uz/1863560/>

¹¹ <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/86090/>

¹² <https://t.me/sputniklive/31825>

¹³ <https://www.interfax.ru/business/924663>

ideas, notions that are contradictory to its plans of strategic communications. For example, in February 2024, Sherzodkhon Qudratkhoja, head of the national mass media association, gave an interview and stated how Russian nationals in Uzbekistan are being negligent, disrespectful due to not knowing the Uzbek language despite living for decades of their lives and he criticized the statements of Prilepin, Smolin, and Mikheyev. The interview caused increased awareness and activity in social networks, hence, Russia took immediate action by summoning the Uzbek ambassador to the MFA of Russia, and the internet filled with articles regarding Qudratkhoja's comments, and they were tenfold trending than his actual interview.¹⁴

Kazakhstan

Russia wants Kazakhstan to stay close and loyal. It often talks about the "common history," "Soviet friendship," and the importance of the Russian language. However, when Kazakhstan disagrees with Russia (like not supporting the Ukraine war), Russia sometimes sends warning signals through the media or officials. In June 2022, Dmitry Medvedev, former Russian president and deputy chair of Russia's Security Council, posted (then deleted) a statement¹⁵ implying that northern Kazakhstan is "Russian land" and could be a future target if Kazakhstan continues flirting with the West." This stirred outrage in Kazakhstan and was interpreted as strategic signaling to deter pro-Western behavior while reasserting Russia's sphere of influence.

Kyrgyzstan

Russia's 2022 strategic communication in Kyrgyzstan focused on security and stability to maintain influence after the Ukraine invasion. Anti-Western narratives portrayed NATO's actions as a risk to Central Asia, with Channel One framing Russia as a regional protector, a speech act to legitimize its invasion (Channel One, 2022). Russia presents itself as a friendly and helpful "big brother." It talks a lot about shared culture, the importance of the Russian language, and Russia's support for Kyrgyz migrant workers. Russian media and diplomats often praise Kyrgyzstan for staying close to Moscow and warn about the "danger" of Western influence. In October 2023, Kyrgyzstan decided to keep teaching Russian as an official language in schools. Russian media like Sputnik and officials praised this move as a sign of friendship. Russia used this moment to remind Kyrgyzstan that being close to Russia means stability and support. Furthermore, a month ago, the Kyrgyz government had an agreement with President Putin to open nine Russian schools in the territory.¹⁶

¹⁴ Gazeta.uz. (2024, February 14). Statement of Journalism University rector causes reaction from Russian MFA. Gazeta.Uz. <https://www.gazeta.uz/en/2024/02/14/sherzodkhon-qudratkhoja/>

¹⁵ Umarov, T. (2022, August 10). After Ukraine, is Kazakhstan next in the Kremlin's sights? Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2022/08/after-ukraine-is-kazakhstan-next-in-the-kremlins-sights?lang=en>

¹⁶ Официальный сайт Россотрудничества. (2023, September 1). Rossotrudnichestvo. <https://rs.gov.ru/en/news/three-russian-language-schools-to-open-in-kyrgyzstan/>

Tajikistan

Russia's narrative towards Tajikistan, as with other Central Asian countries, has long emphasized mutual security and historical fraternity rooted in the Soviet legacy. Following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, Moscow reframed its discourses to highlight its role as the guarantor of regional stability, frequently tacitly hinting at Tajikistan as vulnerable to terrorism and extremism without a Russian military presence. This aligns with its broader strategic goal of maintaining influence through the 201st military base and the CSTO framework. Russia also uses labor migration (millions of Tajiks work in Russia) to apply economic and political influence, and by doing those, Russia indirectly promotes the idea that Tajikistan's stability and prosperity are dependent upon continued ties with Moscow.

Belarus

Between 2022 and 2024, Russia consistently portrayed Belarus as its closest ally. We can see that in mentioning their deep integration through the "Union State," at the official press conferences, webpages of media outlets. The narrative focuses on shared history, mutual defense, and cultural ties. Russian officials and state media highlight joint military activities and Belarus's support in regional matters, presenting the partnership as a model of unity against Western influence. For example, in January 2023, Russia and Belarus commenced joint air force exercises across all Belarusian military airfields¹⁷ and were widely covered by foreign and Russian state media. Russia also highlighted Belarus's support for the Ukraine war without sending troops. This message was used to show other CIS countries what a "true ally" looks like. In March 2023, President Vladimir Putin announced plans to station Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus.¹⁸ This move was outlined as a defensive measure against NATO expansion and a testament to the deepening military integration between Russia and Belarus. Another important point in this deal was that President Putin announced it while comparing its similarities with nuclear arms deals between the US and its Western allies.

Armenia

During this period, Russia's narrative toward Armenia turned especially colder and more critical. While maintaining peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh after the 2020 war, Moscow described the Armenian leadership, especially under Prime Minister Pashinyan, as increasingly unreliable and likely to be influenced by Western manipulation. Some scholars believed that Russia's negligence during the 2023 Azerbaijani offensive¹⁹ led to the end of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. However, according to the Russian side, it was rhetorically

¹⁷ Euronews. (2023, January 16). Russia and Belarus start joint drills, sparking fears of a new Ukraine offensive. Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/2023/01/16/russia-and-belarus-start-joint-drills-sparking-fears-of-a-new-ukraine-offensive>

¹⁸ Reuters. (2023, March 25). What did Putin say on tactical nuclear weapons and Belarus? Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/what-did-putin-say-tactical-nuclear-weapons-belarus-2023-03-25/>

¹⁹ Giorgi Badridze, G., Mammadov, M., Melkonian, S., & Muradov, M. (2024, February 2). Russia in the south caucasus: Losing, adapting, overcoming - SCEEUS. Sceeus. <https://sceeus.se/publikationer/russia-in-the-south-caucasus-losing-adapting-overcoming/>

justified as Armenia's fault for distancing itself from CSTO obligations. Russian state media indirectly shifted blame on to Armenia for the failure of collective defense mechanisms and presented Moscow as a neutral force undermined by Yerevan's pro-Western apparatus, particularly its outreach to the EU and U.S. Furthermore, on September 18, 2024, Armenia's National Security Service prevented an alleged coup attempt by pro-Russian elements.²⁰ The plotters were reportedly armed, trained, and financed by Russian entities. This incident reflects the deteriorating Armenia-Russia relations and Russia's narrative of punishing Armenia for its pro-Western orientation and reduced reliance on Moscow.

Azerbaijan

Russia's narrative toward Azerbaijan from 2022 to 2024 was cautious yet pragmatic. After the 2020 ceasefire, Russia sought to maintain its image as a neutral guarantor, but the 2023 dissolution of Nagorno-Karabakh shifted this balance. Moscow explained its limited involvement as a smart and necessary choice, showing it still matters in the region without creating direct conflict. Russian officials and media often praised Azerbaijan as a strong regional player and suggested it could help Russia balance the influence of the West and Turkey. At the same time, Russia quietly warned Azerbaijan not to act too independently, reminding everyone that peace in the South Caucasus depends on Russia's role as a mediator and peacekeeper. As a sequel to the declaration on Allied Interaction (which was signed in February 2022), on August 19, 2024, Presidents Vladimir Putin and Ilham Aliyev issued a joint statement in Baku,²¹ reaffirming their commitment to strengthening interstate relations based on mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity. The statement emphasized cooperation in international organizations and support for Azerbaijan's increased status within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Russian media outlets reported on the meeting, highlighting the strategic partnership and shared vision for regional stability.

Moldova

Since that year, Russia has taken a significantly harsher position when it comes to Moldova's business. On the heels of a promise by President Maia Sandu to pursue European integration and ambitions of joining the EU, Russian authorities and media pointed to Moldova as a Western pawn (more like a puppet) and warned of destabilization.²² The Kremlin spread fear that Moldova might attack Transnistria and warned that NATO was surrounding the region and using hybrid warfare tactics. Russian media also tried to create division inside Moldova by supporting anti-government protests and questioning the country's ability to be energy

²⁰ Blank, S. (2024, October 23). What does Russia's attempted coup in Armenia mean? Caciaanalyst. <https://www.caciaanalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13824-what-does-russias-attempted-coup-in-armenia-mean.html>

²¹ Ilham Aliyev and President Vladimir Putin made press statements. (2024, August 19). President.Az. <https://president.az/en/articles/view/66707>

²² Anticoruptie.md. (2023, March 16). "Matryoshkas" of Russian propaganda in the Republic of Moldova: Puppets and puppeteers. Anticoruptie.Md. <https://anticoruptie.md/en/investigations/social/matryoshkas-of-russian-propaganda-in-the-republic-of-moldova-puppets-and-puppeteers>

independent. In 2023 and 2024, Russia presented itself as the defender of Russian-speaking people and claimed that Moldova's move toward the West was a dangerous choice that could lead to a conflict similar to the war in Ukraine. In October 2024, Moldovan authorities uncovered a large-scale electoral fraud operation financed by pro-Russian oligarch Ilan Shor. Over \$15 million was allegedly distributed to influence the presidential election.²³ This aligns with Russia's narrative of undermining Moldova's European integration efforts and maintaining its influence through destabilization tactics.

Conclusion

In 2022, Russia reached out to the public in the eight CIS states (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) to hold onto its influence after the Ukraine invasion shook the world. Through a Constructivist lens, we see Russia telling a powerful story of shared identity. Speech acts, like RT's warnings of NATO threats or Sputnik's claims of Western plots, painted Russia as a protector, justifying its actions. Russia used media like Channel One, TASS, Telegram, and diplomatic talks to spread messages about being against the West, keeping Soviet-era friendships, promoting stability, and growing economic ties. For example, in Belarus, shared anti-Western speeches with Lukashenko showed close support. Russia also encouraged countries to adopt pro-Russian views, like supporting Russian-speaking groups in Moldova or making energy deals with Azerbaijan. By 2023–2024, Russia's message became stronger. It talked more about building a world with many powerful countries, not just the West, and pushed for a united Eurasian identity. This approach helped Russia stay influential even under sanctions by using media and diplomacy to create a common story across the region. From a constructivist view, these actions show how ideas and identity can shape global influence.

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²³ Parliament condemns Russia's interference in Moldova. (2024, October 9). Europäisches Parlament. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/de/press-room/20241003IPR24421/parliament-condemns-russia-s-interference-in-moldova>

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