

## SEIZE THE PRESS, SEIZE THE DAY: THE INFLUENCE OF POLITICALLY AFFILIATED MEDIA IN MOLDOVA'S 2016 ELECTIONS

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### Introduction

In Moldova, media ownership by oligarchs and political figures has reached the highest level in the last decade. According to a report by the Association of Independent Press (API)<sup>1</sup>, four of the five TV channels with national coverage are controlled by the leader of the ruling Democratic Party (PDM), Vladimir Plahotniuc. Other media companies are managed by opposition politicians, mayors, former members of the parliament, and influential businessmen, who tend to adopt a restrictive policy on media content and promote specific political parties. The concentration of media resources in the hands of a few public officials has significant influence on the electorate, whose voting preferences can be manipulated through disinformation and fake news. This was visible during the second round of the 2016 presidential elections in Moldova, with powerful media owners undermining the campaign of the center-right, pro-European candidate, Maia Sandu, and helping Igor Dodon, a left-wing candidate and a strong supporter of Russia.

This policy brief argues that political control over media institutions in Moldova has an impact on election results. Media concentration allows specific candidates to widely promote their messages, leading to unfair electoral advantage. The lack of transparency of politically affiliated owners—many of whom own outlets providing nationwide coverage—fuels strong skepticism over the number of truly independent media sources in Moldova.

For a better understanding of media ownership concentration in Moldova, this paper will develop a case study, looking at the 2016 presidential election campaign. Its objective is to evaluate whether politically affiliated media offered equal advertising opportunities for the second-round candidates,

Maia Sandu and Igor Dodon, and whether the audiovisual authorities sanctioned possible violations. Finally, this analysis will conclude with a set of recommendations for depoliticizing, both *de jure* and *de facto*, the private and public media environment.

### Media pluralism in Moldova: More is not always better

Media freedom, pluralism of opinions, and diversity of ownership are key tenets of democracy. Pluralism is essential for political competition, allowing politicians to present their electoral platforms and voters to assess them based on different information sources. By offering multiple avenues for

<sup>1</sup> Asociația Presei Independente, *Capturarea mass-mediei și a altor mijloace de comunicare publică în Republica Moldova*, 2017, [http://www.transparency.md/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/TI\\_Moldova\\_Capturarea\\_Mass\\_Media.pdf](http://www.transparency.md/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/TI_Moldova_Capturarea_Mass_Media.pdf)

dialogue, criticism, and political confrontation between elites, media pluralism is an *a priori* condition for the functioning of genuine opposition movements and a healthy democracy.

In Moldova, under the presidency of Vladimir Voronin (2001–2009), the media suffered from a lack of diversity and the very few independent outlets operated under constant pressure from the authorities. According to the 2008 Freedom House press freedom report,<sup>2</sup> Moldova's media environment was classified as "not free."<sup>3</sup> A high level of politicization at the Coordination Council of Audiovisual Activity (CCA), the institution responsible for media monitoring and allocating television and radio licenses, led to the monopolization of the media market by government-affiliated television stations.

Since the 2009 victory of the largely pro-European coalition, increasing efforts have been made to diversify media content. The negotiations of an Association Agreement with the

European Union (EU) and the gradual harmonization of sectorial legislation pursuant to EU requirements provided an impetus for these efforts. Starting 2010, all radio and television broadcasters have been obliged to publish the name of their owners, and since 2015, they also have to publish online any changes to ownership. Moreover, in 2016, the parliament adopted a new law that reduced the number of licenses one could possess from five to two. Although, *de jure*, these laws were presented as a major step forward in reforming the media sector, *de facto* the reforms simply endorsed informal management practices, with some key politicians formally assigning ownership of their outlets to loyal subordinates while, in fact, retaining full control.

Moldovan media broadcasters are largely politically affiliated. The leader of the Democratic Party (PDM), Vladimir Plahotniuc, and his close partners own seven radio and

2 Freedom House, Freedom of the Press 2009: Further Declines in Global Media Independence, 2009, <https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FOTP%202009%20Final%20Full%20Report.pdf>.

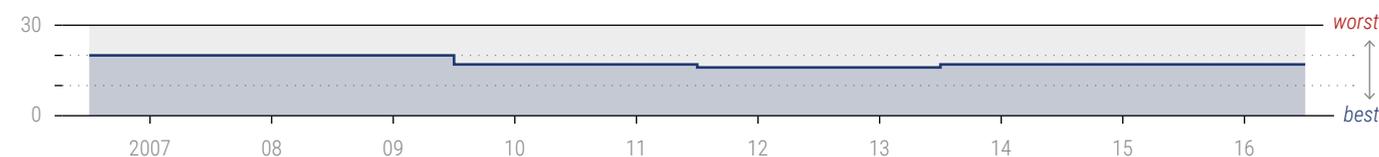
3 Moldova has obtained 67 points out of 100, with 0 being the best and 100 being the worst possible score.

### Key developments in Moldova

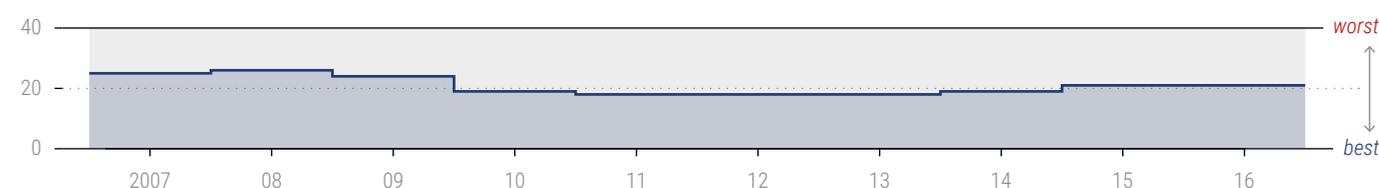
#### PRESS FREEDOM SCORE



#### LEGAL ENVIRONMENT



#### POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT



Source: Freedom House's Freedom of the Press ratings for Moldova, assessing years 2007-2016

television outlets<sup>4</sup>—the largest share on the market. Another two TV stations, NTV Moldova and Accent TV, are associated with President Igor Dodon's Socialist Party (PSRM). The mayor of Orhei, Ilan Shor, a millionaire currently under investigation for bank fraud, reportedly owns another two television stations.<sup>5</sup> These examples demonstrate a very complicated network of media ownership across the political spectrum, which, at first glance, could give the impression of a plural media market. However, the fact that these outlets are not only linked to politicians and oligarchs through obscure channels but also serve to promote their interests dispels any doubts over the nature of these acquisitions and their effects on media freedom.

## Disinformation and fake news: the case of the presidential elections

The most recent presidential elections in Moldova took place in two rounds during October and November 2016. The first round took place on October 30, with the Socialist and pro-Russian candidate Igor Dodon emerging as the frontrunner with 47.91 percent of the vote, and the center-right, pro-European Maia Sandu coming second with 38.71 percent. As the two best performing candidates, Dodon and Sandu ran in a second round of votes on November 13. Dodon won the presidency with an electoral share of 52.11 percent and a margin of 67,488 votes.<sup>6</sup>

Three interlinking factors helped Dodon to win the elections: *political maneuvering*, a *large-scale disinformation campaign*, and the *lack of punitive measures* for outlets engaging in that campaign.

Political maneuvering right before the elections played an important role in confusing voters and ultimately giving Dodon an edge in the race. On October 26, four days before the first round, Marian Lupu, the candidate of PDM, decided to withdraw his candidacy and openly endorsed Maia Sandu, urging his supporters to vote for her. PDM leader Plahotniuc also claimed that their party's intention was to support Sandu, as she was the pro-European candidate with the highest chance to succeed. At the same time, all four TV stations controlled by Plahotniuc continued smearing Sandu. Not

only did these stations spread fake news about her, but they also worked in tandem with Dodon-affiliated media outlets to produce content that bordered on hate speech.

The PDM's aim with this strategy was twofold. On the one hand, the party intended to preserve the illusion of a truly pro-European force and an image of a good actor in the eyes of the EU through statements of support for Sandu. On the other hand, it directed all its media and regional resources towards facilitating Dodon's success. Ultimately, its goal was to maintain the existing divisions along geopolitical fault lines<sup>7</sup> and prevent Sandu from having a significant leverage over the center right. With only tens of thousands of votes standing between the two candidates, Plahotniuc's TV stations (Prime, Canal 2, Canal 3, Publika) played a decisive role in the outcome of the election.

The disinformation campaign that these TV stations waged, together with Dodon-affiliated media outlets NTV Moldova and Accent TV, was based on a few easily identifiable characteristics. First, one of the most divisive subjects discussed was the claim that Europe will be "flooded" by an unstoppable wave of refugees and that all countries will have to settle tens if not hundreds of thousands of them—an "import" from the fake news spread throughout the EU. On November 5, Prime TV, the most watched television channel in Moldova,<sup>8</sup> reported that 30,000 Syrian refugees would be settled in Moldova if Sandu won the elections.<sup>9</sup> The original source of this fake information was an obscure website—a fact that journalists intentionally ignored and that raised questions of journalistic ethics. Second, politically affiliated media distributed a number of erroneous statements without confirming facts or undertaking due diligence. Media outlets for example unscrupulously reported Dodon's unsubstantiated claims that Sandu's reforms during her tenure as Minister of Education had led to 400 youth suicides,<sup>10</sup> an allegation easily disproven by official statistics. Third, outlets proliferated messages—endorsed by some bishops of the Orthodox Church—that amounted to hate speech against the LGBT community. The headlines reporting on these statements tried to present Sandu as a pro-LGBT candidate, painting her in a negative light in Moldova's traditionally conservative society. Moreover, these media institutions did not indicate the Orthodox Church's implication in the electoral campaign and the political partisanship of its repre-

4 Cine sunt proprietarii posturilor de radio și televiziune din Moldova, 2015, <https://anticoruptie.md/ro/stiri/cine-sunt-proprietarii-posturilor-de-radio-si-televiziune-din-moldova>.

5 Independent Journalism Center, Press Freedom Report Republic of Moldova 2015, 2016, <http://media-azi.md/en/press-freedom-report-republic-moldova-2015>.

6 Alegerile Președintelui Republicii Moldova din 30 octombrie și 13 noiembrie 2016, <http://www.e-democracy.md/elections/presidential/2016/>.

7 According to the Institute of Public Policies' Barometer of Public Opinion (BOP) from April 2017, in case of a referendum, 39% of the respondents would vote for Moldova's integration in the European Union and 40% would vote for the integration in the Eurasian Economic Union, <http://ipp.md/old/libview.php?l=ro&idc=156&id=820>.

8 BOP's results show that 44% of the respondents have mentioned Prime TV as their main source of information from all the TV stations, <http://ipp.md/old/libview.php?l=ro&idc=156&id=820>.

9 Cum a evoluat minciuna cu sirienii: de la un site de pamflete, la cea mai urmărită televiziune din țară, <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-politice/cum-a-evoluat-minciuna-cu-sirienii-de-la-un-site-de-pamflete-la-cea-mai-urmarita-televiziune-din-tara>.

10 Victoria Bucataru, Stagnation on the Road to Europe: Moldova after the Presidential Elections, Nations in Transit brief, Freedom House, 2016, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/stagnation-road-europe-moldova-after-presidential-election#WjA9kEplIU>.



Photo by Pexels

sentatives. This spectrum of fake news confused a considerable part of the electorate, who continue to use Moldovan TV channels as their primary source of information.<sup>11</sup>

According to the evaluation of the Association of Independent Press (API), the TV stations controlled by Plahotniuc clearly defamed Maia Sandu, which led to an unbalanced coverage during the electoral campaign.<sup>12</sup> The same analysis concluded that media affiliated with Dodon massively promoted him, while failing to offer equal advertising opportunities to Sandu.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the journalists highlighted the lack of professionalism and journalistic integrity displayed by politically affiliated TV stations.

Finally, the punitive measures applied against politically affiliated outlets for their unbalanced coverage of the electoral campaign were mild. After the first round of elections, the CCA fined all of the above-mentioned TV stations 5,400 lei (\$307) each. After the second round, the CCA sanctioned four TV stations (Publika TV, NTV Moldova, Accent TV and Jurnal TV) by prohibiting them from broadcasting advertisements for three days<sup>14</sup> and handed out a 5,400-lei fine to two stations, Prime TV and Ren TV Moldova, and smaller sanctions to TV 7.<sup>15</sup> These measures revealed serious gaps in the Audiovisual Code and the CCA's regulations for electoral campaigns, with vague categorization of the sanctions, insignificant punishments for possible abuses, and a lack of specific provisions regarding electoral campaigns.

Thus, media organizations could be considered as the real "arbiters" of the vote in Moldova's 2016 elections. By exploiting stereotypes and hate speech and relying on voters' lack of interest and indifference, they increased the share of votes for Dodon and undermined the campaign run by Sandu. The tools of disinformation that these outlets used—similar to what we have seen in the United States and in European countries—distorted sensitive issues and offered a one-sided interpretation of them as undisputed facts to a religious-conservative electorate.

## Conclusions

Media institutions controlled by various political groups played a key role in the outcome of the 2016 elections in Moldova. Aligned with the interests and political affiliation of their owners, these outlets engaged with the electorate on a new level, hurling them into the middle of a propaganda marathon that featured considerable elements of disinformation and fake news. These outlets also developed a new, domestic version of fake news, which were then spread widely by Plahotniuc's media empire. Furthermore, the four TV channels affiliated with Plahotniuc, together with Dodon's loyal stations, openly pursued the same objective of undermining Maia Sandu's candidacy. By sharing administrative resources as well as taking advantage of the considerable influence of Moldova's Orthodox Church during the campaign, Plahotniuc and Dodon have indirectly become strategic allies, both working against Sandu.

11 According to the Barometer of Public Opinion from April 2017, elaborated by the Institute for Public Policies, 72 percent of the respondents have indicated the TV channels as their main source of information: <http://ipp.md/old/libview.php?l=ro&idc=156&id=820>.

12 Asociația Presei Independente, Centrul pentru Jurnalism Independent, Monotorizarea mass-media în campania electorală pentru alegerile prezidențiale 2016, 2016, <http://www.e-democracy.md/files/elections/presidential2016/final-report-api-cji-elections-2016-ro.pdf>

13 Ibid.

14 CCA a sancționat patru posturi TV, <http://www.e-democracy.md/elections/presidential/2016/electoral-news/20161125/>

15 Ibid.

The lack of media pluralism in Moldova is the result of state capture and a high-level of corruption within the public administration. The institutional resources for monitoring and sanctioning outlets are limited and unfit to restrict the work of propaganda media. Moreover, there are doubts regarding the integrity of CCA members. The audiovisual sphere lacks both a strong institutional check and an active civil sector that would monitor its performance, especially when analyzing critical cases such as media coverage of electoral campaigns. All of these factors signal symptomatic problems that result in citizens' weak capacity to filter and analyze information, affecting the outcome of elections and ultimately the future of the country as a whole.

The political ownership of media outlets represents a major threat to the development and functioning of a healthy democracy in Moldova. As the regime of media ownership and acquisition cannot be restricted on the basis of integrity criteria, institutional actors including the CCA and the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) have to apply efficient supervisory mechanisms to prevent broadcasters' systemic law breaking. Their final aim should be to guarantee better regulation of the media market and the media's factual presentation of political, economic, and social phenomena and events.

## Recommendations for Moldova's institutional actors

- **Elect CCA members by a mixed commission, composed of both parliament and civil society representatives.** The CCA's members are presently nominated by parliament and are accountable only to the legislature. A reform of the appointment of CCA members would remove any concerns of political interference and increase public trust in this institution.
- **Apply more severe and clearly defined sanctions.** Each case of rule breaking needs an individual approach. Restrictive measures, including withdrawing licenses for willfully spreading fake news, should be considered. The EU's recently adopted decisions for fighting disinformation could represent a valuable example for the Moldovan authorities.
- **During electoral campaigns, publicly denounce irregularities in the media's activity.** A fact-checking campaign, implemented by the CCA in cooperation with civil society, would allow for better monitoring of electoral campaigns and contribute to voters' wider understanding of existing problems.
- **Oblige the owners of blogs and websites to publish the name and institutional affiliation of their owners.** Often, the politically affiliated or owned TV channels cite articles on blogs and websites as the primary source of their news headlines. Since online media outlets are not currently required to publish information on their ownership or affiliation, there are still doubts over the independence and accuracy of these sources.
- **Organize public campaigns and debates within local communities to raise awareness of the importance of media pluralism.** During elections, widely distributed video spots, public lectures in schools and universities, and other of information materials should assist the electorate. Increasing efforts should be made to train citizens to access different media sources and to critically analyze their content.



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