

## MEDIA PLURALISM AND THE CONCENTRATION OF OWNERSHIP IN MOLDOVA

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### Introduction

Over the past ten years, politicians and influential businessmen have increased their control over Moldova's press. The most influential outlets, especially among television stations, are politically affiliated or are in fact owned by politicians. They exert significant influence over the content of public discussions, with their owners' private interests frequently determining the topics they cover. These often have no connection to the problems and needs of Moldovan citizens and society at large. Lack of professionalism and qualitative problems, including media manipulation, disinformation, and propaganda, are widespread in Moldova's media environment. These erode credibility and trust in the media and, by increasing citizens' vulnerability to manipulation, negatively affect democratic consolidation in the country.

This policy brief examines the challenges Moldova's media are facing related to increased concentration and politically affiliated ownership and offers recommendations to improve the situation.

### Media pluralism: The state of play

Media pluralism and diversity of opinions are fundamental characteristics of a free press. Consequently, a genuinely free media is only viable in a market that is not marked by monopoly. Without freedom and pluralism of the media, citizens are unable to scrutinize the government or obtain the necessary information to make informed decisions. Both Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights stress that "the right to free expression and the

free flow of information is only possible if society has free access to a multitude of media, and if society has a free choice between different media outlets."<sup>1</sup> In general, we can examine "external pluralism," or the number and diversity of media content providers in a given media market, and "internal pluralism," which is the diversity of content and the availability of different opinions as well as the representation of the different social and ethnic groups in a society.

The Constitution of Moldova and media legislation<sup>2</sup> include provisions on political pluralism and social and cultural

1 "Media Pluralism and Human Rights," Commissioner for Human Rights, December 6, 2011, <https://rm.coe.int/16806da515>.

2 "Code 260: Audiovisual Code of the Republic of Moldova," Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, August 27, 2006, [http://lex.justice.md/document\\_rom.php?id=041D82D8:3A07C731](http://lex.justice.md/document_rom.php?id=041D82D8:3A07C731); and "Law 982," Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, May 11, 2000, <http://lex.justice.md/md/311759/>; and "Law 243," Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, October 26, 1994, <http://lex.justice.md/index.php?action=view&view=-doc&lang=1&id=311633>.

diversity, but media pluralism is not defined as a concept and there are no specific, implementable regulations related to it. Article 7 (1) of the Broadcasting Code, for instance, states that broadcasters should ensure political and social pluralism, and cultural, linguistic and religious diversity. Broadcasters must also ensure that they do not favor any political parties and that all parties benefit from the same opportunities to promote their opinions. The code, in addition, includes provisions on ensuring the transparency of media ownership (Article 66) and empowers Moldova's regulatory body, the Broadcasting Coordinating Council (CCA), to protect pluralism through limiting media concentration in order to avoid the establishment of outlets that would dominate public opinion (Article 7 (5)).<sup>3</sup>

However, the laws regulating concentration in the audiovisual field do not specify upper limits or ceilings in terms of audience share and market share, and do not offer tools or mechanisms for the CCA to promptly and efficiently intervene. Further complicating matters, the CCA is not independent from political and economic interests, which makes the implementation of provisions regulating broadcasting concentration difficult, if not impossible.

As researchers conclude, there is an obvious lack of diversity in Moldova's media market in terms of ownership, as well as cultural and geographical diversity.<sup>4</sup> The most influential media outlets are concentrated in the hands of a few politicians. These outlets, especially TV stations, exert significant influence over the public, often deciding what topics are advanced and framing issues according to their owners' interests and not broader considerations of public interest.<sup>5</sup> This leads to a "concentration" of media content, depriving audiences of pluralistic and diverse opinions.

While politically affiliated media have no complaints of financial problems, independent outlets struggle to survive in a market characterized by unfair competition. The expansion of social media, coupled with the shrinking advertising market dominated by politicians that own advertising companies, has contributed to independent outlets' financial fragility and have increased their reliance on foreign donors. While, in theory, outlets have the ability to publish more pluralistic content and spread it across multiple platforms, politicians are targeting online media as well, narrowing the space for independent publishers.

The media system in Moldova is linguistically divided and, arguably, contains two separate, autonomous subsystems: a Romanian- and a Russian-speaking one. These include print dailies and weeklies with national and regional circulation, broadcast outlets with national and regional coverage, and online outlets. The information space is dominated by influential, highly-rated audiovisual content from Russia that is rebroadcast by local media. For instance, Prime TV, which rebroadcasts some programming from the Russian station Perviy Kanal, and RTR Moldova, a channel that produces local content and retransmits programming from Russia, received the highest ratings among 16 channels measured in December 2017 by AGB Nielsen Media Research. Two other channels rebroadcasting Russian content, NTV Moldova and TNT Exclusiv TV, also finished in the top ten.<sup>6</sup> Prime, RTR Moldova, and NTV Moldova have the highest figures in terms of audience share—they are watched by 57.8 percent, 23.3 percent, and 18.5 percent of the population, respectively.<sup>7</sup> It is worth mentioning that, according to the latest research, 39 percent of the population receives information from outlets in Russia, and those are trusted by about 41 percent of Moldovan consumers.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of geographical distribution, about 60 percent of broadcasters are concentrated in Chisinau, raising concerns that the national media system is too centralized.<sup>9</sup>

## Media ownership and concentration

Even though the Broadcasting Code prohibits political parties from owning radio or TV stations, party members themselves are not forbidden to hold licenses. Consequently, television stations can be affiliated with politicians; moreover, political leaders may own broadcast media and use them to promote their parties' programs, policies, and ideology.

In 2015, following increasing civil society pressure on politicians, Moldova's parliament passed a law obliging broadcasters to publish data on their de facto owners and beneficiaries. This requirement revealed evidence that a significant percentage of media outlets is in the hands of oligarchs and politicians, who have consolidated their political power leveraging media assets that they, or their close associates, own. Thus, for instance, Vladimir Plahotniuc, the head of the Democratic Party (PDM), stated at the end of 2015 that he owned four TV stations (Publika, Prime, Canal 2, and Canal 3) and three radio

3 "Code 260: Audiovisual Code of the Republic of Moldova," Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, August 27, 2006, [http://lex.justice.md/document\\_rom.php?id=041D82D8:3A07C731](http://lex.justice.md/document_rom.php?id=041D82D8:3A07C731).

4 "Pluralism external mass-media in Republica Moldova: intre oportunitate si realitate" ("External Pluralism of Media in Moldova, Between Opportunities and Reality"), Soros Foundation Moldova, 2015, <https://www.soros.md/files/publications/documents/Pluralismul%20extern%20al%20mass-mediiei%20din%20RM.pdf>.

5 Antti Sillanpää, et al., "The Moldovan Information Environment, Hostile Narratives, and Their Ramifications," NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence, July 2017, <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/moldovan-information-environment-hostile-narratives-and-other-ramifications>.

6 "Цифра недели" ("Figure of the Week"), AGB Nielsen Media Research, December 2017, <http://www.agb.md/data.html>.

7 "Barometer of Public Opinion," Institute for Public Policy, November 2017, <http://ipp.md/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Rezultate-sondaj-Partea-1.pdf>.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Ana Gonța, Ion Bunduchi, and Vasile State, "Pluralismul external mass media din Moldova in 2015" ("External Pluralism of Moldovan Media in 2015"), APEL, 2016, [http://apel.md/public/upload/md\\_2016.05.31\\_Pluralismul-extern-2015\\_ro.pdf](http://apel.md/public/upload/md_2016.05.31_Pluralismul-extern-2015_ro.pdf).



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stations (Publika FM, MuzFM, and Maestro FM). The PDM and Vladimir Plahotniuc are also affiliated with the portals *publika.md*, *voxp publika.md*, *epresa.md*, *autostrada.md*, *zumi.md*, *vesti.md* and *24h.md*. Plahotniuc is also the owner of the advertising agencies Casa Media and Casa Media Plus, which control most of the advertising market in Moldova. While Plahotniuc plays a leading role in Moldova's nominally pro-Western government, his television channels do not shy away from running programming that is produced in Russia.<sup>10</sup>

Moldova's president, Igor Dodon, carries significant weight in his former party, the pro-Russian Socialists Party of Moldova (PSRM), as well as in the media affiliated with that party. There are three TV stations whose *de jure* or *de facto* owners are linked to the Socialists Party and that broadcast predominantly content from Russia – Accent TV, NTV Moldova, and Exclusiv TV. In addition to their influence over these TV stations, the representatives of the PSRM own the newspaper and web portal *Argumenti i fakte* and *tsn.md*, the newspaper *Panorama*, and the web portal *actualitati.md*.<sup>11</sup>

In 2016, the parliament amended the Broadcasting Code, reducing the number of licenses that can be held by a media owner from five to two. However, this did not alter media concentration significantly as a provision was introduced, alongside these amendments, granting owners the right to retain the licenses until their expiration. The parliament removed this provision in March 2017 and required owners holding more than two licenses to dispose of the extras. In May 2017, PDM leader Vladimir Plahotniuc transferred the ownership of two channels (Canal 2 and Canal 3) with national coverage to one of his advisers.

According to data from AGB Moldova, three out of four TV channels are linked to the PDM leader, and two of the three PSRM-affiliated media outlets, are in the top ten most watched TV stations.<sup>12</sup> This indicates a concentration of ownership and audience share in the hands of a few people linked to politics.

Although the CCA announced its intention to reduce concentration in the media, it issued new licenses in 2016 that in fact

10 Antti Sillanpää, et al., "The Moldovan Information Environment, Hostile Narratives, and Their Ramifications," NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence, July 2017, <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/moldovan-information-environment-hostile-narratives-and-other-ramifications>.

11 *Ibid.*

12 "Цифра недели" ("Figure of the Week"), AGB Nielsen Media Research, December 2017, <http://www.agb.md/data.html>.

contributed to an increase in concentration. For example, the CCA granted a license to the channel Exclusiv TV, which became the third license granted to the representatives of PSRM – and thus implicitly to President Igor Dodon. Also in 2017, ITV started broadcasting a channel whose general director is reportedly close to the Party of Socialists.<sup>13</sup>

The data above show that there are two “poles” when it comes to media ownership in Moldova, with outlets concentrating in the hands of the PDM and those in the hands of the PSRM. While, technically, broadcasters comply with the legislation on ownership, the laws are easy to circumvent in practice, and Moldova’s politicians continue to hold onto their dominant positions in forming public opinion.

## The impact of media concentration on pluralism

The concentration of media ownership in Moldova has resulted in a lack of diversity in content, whether in terms of genre, political opinion, or representation of minority groups. The discussion of issues that concern public interest has taken a back seat, overshadowed by private, political, and economic interests. This has made it possible for the politically or economically powerful to manipulate public opinion; media consumers in Moldova are constantly targeted by local politicians and are exposed to a large amount of content focused on politics. There are a range of monitoring reports, case studies, and surveys<sup>14</sup> that clearly show that media owned by politicians are not only biased, but also often prone to manipulating information and, in some cases, even employing propagandistic techniques to promote their owners’ interests.

Such politically affiliated ownership also influences the quality of content and allows most journalists to sidestep professional and ethical standards when covering politicians. This influence is especially obvious during election campaigns, when most media have to promote their owners’ parties and programs.

In 2016, practically all news content broadcast by Plahotniuc’s four stations with nationwide coverage was the same. In 2017, after Plahotniuc gave up two of his licenses, this rate dropped

to 90 percent, demonstrating that the stations changed hands only formally, with their editorial policies remaining the same. Similarly, two channels, owned by the same person and affiliated with the PSRM, broadcast the same content, produced in the same studio, and presented by the same moderator. The third TV station affiliated with the PSRM produces its own news, but the topics and messages are similar to those broadcast by the first two stations.<sup>15</sup>

These examples show that pluralism of opinions is lacking in Moldova and media consumers are limited to the same sources, voices, and ideas. The main gatekeepers—editors, producers, and high-level management—watch the topics covered and sources interviewed closely to make sure that the only opinions represented are those consistent with editorial policy. As such, the free marketplace of ideas is distorted and free press, an essential condition of a consolidated democracy, suffers.

## Conclusions

In order to secure media pluralism, a number of criteria should be fulfilled including diversity in ownership, the availability of content that is culturally and politically varied, independence from economic and political pressure, and the observation of journalistic ethics and quality standards.<sup>16</sup>

Moldova’s media lacks pluralism, especially in the field of audiovisual broadcasts. The most influential outlets are owned by politicians or businessmen with vested interests in politics, which affects their independence and the quality of the content they produce. The regulatory agency responsible for supervising and licensing privately owned broadcast media does not truly fulfill its role as a guarantor of the public interest. Additionally, most independent media are financially fragile, while the advertising market is small and concentrated in the hands of a few politicians.

The concentration of ownership, content, and audience favors the appearance of dominant actors that shape public opinion and results in an underinformed or misinformed public. This is a challenge that in the long run undermines Moldova’s democratic development.

13 “Memorandum on the State of Press Freedom in the Republic of Moldova (May 3, 2016 – May 3, 2017),” Independent Journalism Center (IJC), 2017, <http://media-azi.md/en/memorandum-state-press-freedom-republic-moldova-may-3-2016-%E2%80%93-may-3-2017>.

14 “Elements of Propaganda, Information Manipulation and Violation of Journalism Ethics in the Local Media Space,” IJC, 2017, <http://media-azi.md/en/monitoring-report-no-8-elements-propaganda-information-manipulation-and-violation-journalism-ethics>; and “Monitorizarea mass-media în campania electorală pentru alegerile prezidențiale 2016” (“Media Monitoring in the campaign for presidential elections 2016”), IJC, 2016, <http://media-azi.md/ro/publicatii/monitorizarea-mass-media-%C3%AEn-campania-electoral%C4%83-pentru-alegerile-preziden%C8%9Biale-2016-1>; and “The perception by the population of false and distorted information in the media,” IJC, October 2017, <http://media-azi.md/en/survey-perception-population-false-and-distorted-information-media-october-2017>.

15 Aneta Gonța, “Repetitia este maica manipularii” (“Repetition is the Mother of Manipulation”), *Mediacritica*, September 16, 2016, <http://mediacritica.md/ro/repetitia-este-maica-manipularii/>.

16 “A comparative analysis of media freedom and pluralism in the EU Member States,” European Parliament Policy Department for Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Affairs, September 2016, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/571376/IPOL\\_STU\(2016\)571376\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/571376/IPOL_STU(2016)571376_EN.pdf).

## Recommendations

### To Moldova's authorities:

- Review and adjust the legal framework in order to effectively prevent media market monopolization and fight dominant positions.
- Ensure sufficient competition on the media and advertising market; decrease the share of retransmitted foreign content and increase local content.
- Secure the independence and autonomy of regulatory bodies and increase their efficiency.
- Monitor outlets' content to ensure compliance with pluralism of opinion and full implementation of legislative provisions on media transparency.
- Assist in developing robust media organizations that can successfully compete, maintain their independence from political or commercial pressures, and provide professional, objective, and pluralistic information.

### To the international community:

- Encourage the government to revise and adjust the legal framework according to international standards.
- Support civil society in monitoring the implementation of Moldova's laws.
- Provide financial support to independent media to assist it in producing pluralistic content.



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The Media Forward policy brief series is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of their authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Freedom House, Internews, USAID or the United States Government.



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