

A HUMAN-CENTERED AND HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO MEDIA WORK

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Introduction

Since its independence, Moldova has struggled with many serious problems in its media sector. Among other major issues,¹ one salient problem is that the health of the country's media sector is continuously undermined by media providers' limited understanding of key concepts concerning modern democracy and human rights. This results in the following problems in the media sector:

- *Media reporting that promotes stereotypes and prejudices against certain groups*, including women, disabled people, ethno-linguistic and religious minorities, and senior citizens;
- *The weak transformative potential of reporting*. Rather than cutting to the core of the problem and highlighting the obligation and role of public authorities to resolve it, reporting often distracts the reader by focusing on irrelevant details;
- *Deep divisions within the community of media professionals along ethno-linguistic lines*. This lack of unity and solidarity causes media to be fragmented and therefore vulnerable and unable to adequately defend against attacks on media freedoms.

This policy brief explores these issues in the Moldovan media sector, arguing that the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) to media reporting is a paradigm-shifting framework capable of substantially improving the quality and impact of media work. The brief concludes with a number of recommendations to implement HRBA and realize its benefits in Moldova.

1 "Moldova Freedom of the Press 2017," Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/moldova>; "State of Press in Moldova 2018," the Moldovan Center for Independent Journalism, <http://www.media-azi.md/ro/publicatii/indicele-privind-situa%C8%9Bia-presei-ispm-din-republica-moldova-%C3%AEn-2018>

Media and human rights in Moldova

According to recent studies, xenophobia is widespread in Moldova. A study conducted in 2015 by the Moldovan Equality Council and UN Moldova indicates that large portions of the Moldovan public hold negative or biased views of various minorities and social groups. For example, a majority of Moldovans report that they would refuse even to be neighbors with Roma people, people of African descent, Muslims, persons with disabilities, or people with HIV. Only half of Moldovans would accept a person with a physical disability, a Jewish person, or a member of a religious minority as a friend.² LGBT people are unwelcome even as visitors to Moldova,³ with 40 percent of the population believing them to be “abnormal” or “immoral.”⁴ Over 15 percent of Moldovans reportedly believe that women are too sensitive and emotional to make decisions in emergency situations and that men should hold leading positions in the

state since they know political and economic problems better and “have the necessary skills.”⁵

Another study commissioned by the Moldovan Ombudsperson’s Office and UN Moldova in 2016 and 2018 showed that Moldova’s population is insufficiently informed about human rights. According to the study, media, especially television,⁶ is the population’s primary source of information about human rights.⁷ Media therefore plays an enormous role in informing Moldovans both on current events and human rights, as well as in shaping their views on those events and the people involved. In order to achieve meaningful progress in realizing democratic freedoms in the country, it is of the utmost importance that Moldovan media and the general public develop a sound understanding of human rights and a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) to both production and consumption of media.

Percentage distribution by levels of acceptance

(% cumulatively, expresses the share of respondents accepting the persons from group X up to the respective position)

	Avg. value	Median value	Family member	Friend	Neighbor	Work colleagues	Citizen	Visitor of RM
Russian speakers	0,9	0	78%	82%	84%	85%	90%	96%
Russians living in the RM	0,9	0	76	81	83	85	91	97
Romanians living in the RM	1,6	0	60	66	70	72	83	94
Persons with physical impairments	2,2	1	28	52	61	63	83	89
Jewish people	2,3	2	37	49	57	60	77	90
Foreigners living in the RM, but not holding RM citizenship	2,3	2	40	49	56	59	74	92
Other religious minorities	2,3	2	36	48	58	61	78	91
Roma people	3,1	4	21	32	41	49	73	85
Persons of African origin	3,1	4	19	33	42	45	63	86
Persons of Muslim origin	3,3	4	20	30	38	40	58	79
Persons with mental impairments	3,6	4	11	23	32	33	66	76
Detained persons (ex-detainees)	3,6	4	15	24	31	34	60	72
People living with HIV	4,3	5	4	13	20	22	46	60
LGBT persons	5,2	6	1	3	8	10	18	38
Average social distance	2,8	2,8						

Figure 1. Study of Equality Perceptions and Attitudes in the Republic of Moldova (2015)

2 “Study on Equality Perceptions and Attitudes in the Republic of Moldova,” United Nations in Moldova, 2015, p.19, <http://md.one.un.org/content/unct/moldova/en/home/publications/joint-publications/studiul-privind-percepiile-i-atitudinile-fa-de-egalitate-in-repu.html>

3 *Ibid*, pp.18-19

4 *Ibid*, p.30

5 *Ibid*, p.69

6 Public Opinion Barometer by the Institute of Public Policies, January 2019, <http://bop.ipp.md/en>

7 “Perceptions of Human Rights in the Republic of Moldova,” UNDP Moldova, p.17, http://www.md.undp.org/content/moldova/en/home/library/effective_governance/percep_ii-asupra-drepturilor-omului-in-republica-moldova.html

What is a Human Rights Based Approach (to Media)?

The Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) places the inherent diversity of humans and their fundamental rights at the central focus of any sector. While the idea for HRBA stems from the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the approach has only recently been developed and implemented in practice. Various UN agencies and international organizations (UNICEF, WHO, UNESCO, Care, Oxfam, ActionAid, and Save the Children⁸) pioneered the approach in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In 2003, the UN Development Group announced that human rights principles would play a major guiding role for all their programming.⁹ Since then, HRBA has been used by organizations all over the world in a variety of sectors – including healthcare, education, social care, housing, drugs policies, immigration, municipal development,¹⁰ and – more recently – journalism.¹¹

Some dimensions of HRBA in media work are already being discussed and operationalized. For example, scholarly efforts studying gender and media are fairly widespread.¹² The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has also been a long-standing supporter of minority rights in the media sector, publishing its “Guidelines on the Use of Minority Languages in Broadcast Media” in 2003.¹³ Most recently, the organization published the Tallinn Guidelines on National Minorities and the Media in the Digital Age in February 2019.¹⁴

In order to successfully implement HRBA, it is crucial that society is viewed through a human rights lens, whereby:

- Public authorities are under an obligation to proactively deliver human rights, and it is understood that many societal problems result from failure on the part of public authorities to uphold human rights commitments;
- Society is understood to have inherent diversity, including diverse conceptions of what is normal and acceptable (multi-normativity);
- Society acts in solidarity with groups who are particularly vulnerable to human rights violations, rather than in the spirit of mercy and/or charity;
- The power of the majority is limited by the human rights of the minorities.

Focus on people and their human rights

The focus of HRBA on people and human rights suggests that the first questions to be asked in each media report are – what happened to the people involved and to their fundamental rights? And what role did the authorities play?

During the outbreak of protests in Chisinau in April 2009,¹⁵ it was striking to observe that most of the media reporting on the dramatic events in Chisinau focused on two major issues – electoral losses and gains among political forces, and damage caused to the presidential and parliamentary buildings. The fact that hundreds of people were arbitrarily arrested and tortured in police custody – resulting in several deaths¹⁶ – received only limited or marginal attention in Moldovan media coverage at the time.¹⁷

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- 8 Nelson & Dorsey, “Who practices rights-based development? A progress report on work at the nexus of human rights and development,” *World Development*, 104 (2018), pp. 97–107
- 9 “The UN Statement of Common Understanding on Human Rights-Based Approaches to Development Cooperation and Programming,” United Nations Development Group, 2003, <https://www.undg.org/document/the-human-rights-based-approach>
- 10 Canada is developing a new housing strategy taking HRBA as its framework. Costa Rica and Uruguay have placed HRBA at the basis of reforms in their health care systems. In January 2019, Chief Human Rights Commissioner of New Zealand, Paul Hunt, declared that “human rights place the well-being, dignity and equality of individuals and communities at the center of all law, policy and practice,” and demanded that the government fully adopt HRBA (<https://www.hrc.co.nz/news/chief-human-rights-commissioner-urges-government-treat-poverty-human-rights-issue>). In February 2019, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, emphasized that “Human rights-based policies are effective. They deliver better outcomes for people” (<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24203&LangID=E>).
- 11 Thomas Rose, “A Human Rights-Based Approach to Journalism: Ghana,” *The Journal of International Communication*, 2013, 19:1, pp. 85-106, <https://www.tandfonline.com/action/showCitFormats?doi=10.1080%2F13216597.2012.737347>
- 12 For example: UNESCO, “Media Diversity and Gender Equality,” <https://en.unesco.org/themes/media-diversity-and-gender-equality>; Council of Europe, “Combating gender stereotyping and sexism in the media,” <https://rm.coe.int/168064379b>; Scharrer, Erica “Representations of Gender in the Media,” *The Oxford Handbook of Media Psychology* (2012)
- 13 “Guidelines on the Use of Minority Languages in the Broadcast Media,” OSCE, 2003, <https://www.osce.org/hcnm/32310>
- 14 OSCE, “Tallinn Guidelines on National Minorities and the Media in the Digital Age,” February 2019, <https://www.osce.org/hcnm/tallinn-guidelines>
- 15 Widespread protests broke out on April 7, 2009 in reaction to a Communist victory in the parliamentary elections: “Protests in Moldova Explode, With Help of Twitter,” *The New York Times*, April 7, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/08/world/europe/08moldova.html>
- 16 Amnesty International, “Moldova: Police torture and other ill-treatment: It’s still ‘just normal’ in Moldova,” November 30, 2009, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur59/009/2009/en/>
- 17 For example, Unimedia’s coverage of the April 2009 events had a heavy focus on political and electoral dimensions, as well as on damage to buildings and property. The arrests and mistreatment of hundreds of protesters by law enforcement received much less attention. For example: <https://unimedia.info/stiri/-10249.html>, <https://unimedia.info/stiri/-10257.html>, <https://unimedia.info/stiri/-10262.html>, <https://unimedia.info/stiri/-10265.html>, <https://unimedia.info/stiri/-10268.html>, <https://unimedia.info/stiri/-10278.html>.

Similarly, it is common for Moldovan media to focus reporting on emotional and inter-personal factors. In cases of gender-based sexual abuse or trafficking, for instance, reporters in Moldova may seek details on the past sexual life of the alleged victim and/or her previous relations with men. However, it is rare when the media conducts an investigation into the factors that made such gross human rights violations possible, with attention to the public authorities' role and actions (or lack thereof). A shift to HRBA would require that these issues become central to media reporting.

Inherent diversity and multi-normativity

Moldovan society is diverse along multiple criteria – gender, age, ethnic background, sexual orientation, native and spoken languages, religious affiliation, and disability status. Yet there is insufficient understanding among Moldovan society and media that this inherent diversity requires a tailored understanding and approach to each societal group.

Many members of the societal majority and media community have difficulty understanding and accepting that the primary concerns and priorities of majority and minority groups could be fundamentally different. For example, women and men in Moldovan society experience fundamentally different conditions for personal development; hence, they may have different life views and priority needs. The life conditions of persons with disabilities are substantially different from those without disabilities. Worldviews and priority needs of ethno-linguistic minorities may be very different from those of the ethno-linguistic majority.¹⁸

Many members of the majority also seek to operate within the framework of single normativity, i.e., of the idea that there is one single set of norms against which everything is measured. One "true" history, one "standard" language, culture and religion, one type of "standard" family (with two "standard" genders). However, these absolutist standards do not actually exist in nature or society. Nature and society encompass a spectrum of diversities. For example, there is a spectrum of ability within which none of us are perfectly "able;" all of us are somewhere on this spectrum with some personal particularities and minor or major "disabilities" (allergies, dietary limitations, imperfect eyesight, etc.). This understanding of diversity is largely missing in Moldova.

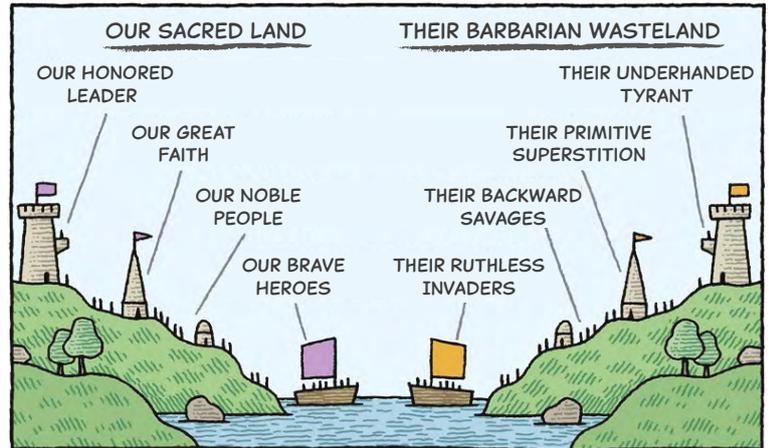


Figure 2 - Image taken from pikabu.ru

Diversity and minorities: ethnic, linguistic and religious

Interethnic relations and language issues are a complex and difficult topic in Moldova. For decades Moldova has remained divided along ethnic, religious, political, geopolitical and linguistic lines.¹⁹ These divisions cut deeply and bitterly into Moldovan history, impacting each successive generation. It is difficult for media in Moldova to remain above these deeply engrained divisions. In most cases Moldovan media adopt a biased, dichotomized, and politicized approach. This approach leads to divisive outcomes – society is seen and presented as divided in groups of us and them, where "they" are brainwashed agents of "our enemies" seeking to harm "us," while "we" are the holders of "truth" who seek to restore "historic fairness."²⁰ Similarly, Moldovans generally have a flawed understanding of the roles of majority and minority groups. For instance, it is common to argue that minorities should submit to the decision of majority, because democracy is erroneously equated with majority rule.²¹

The divisions along ethno-linguistic lines also run deeply across the media profession. The Union of Journalists of Moldova has not become a truly unifying institution for the media profession, as it is perceived among Russian-language media to have a strong pro-Romanian agenda. The Moldovan Press Council and Association of Independent Press (API) are also dominated by representatives of primarily Romanian-language media. Russian-language journalists from Moldova

18 For example, the limited availability and affordability of childcare facilities is one of the key obstacles to a good social and professional life for many Moldovan women with children. For Moldovan men, this factor much less of an obstacle. Linguistic minorities may struggle to achieve a good social and professional life due to language barriers and assimilation, while these are not a problems for the linguistic majority.

19 Ivan Simonovic, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, "Moldova: A time of challenges and opportunities," <https://www.ohchr.org/FR/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=18550&LangID=E>

20 Examples of this reporting in Moldovan media outlets: https://www.realitatea.md/propaganda-rusilor-zlopametnaie_629.html; <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26488/3357974/>; <https://romaniabreakingnews.ro/tragedia-constiintei-de-neam-dintre-prut-si-nistru-2-martie-1992-vs-9-mai-1945/>; <https://10tv.md/2017/08/12/eliberatorii-ne-au-ucis-strabunii-pesto-1-milion-si-jumatate-de-basarabeni-ucisi-de-rusi/>.

21 This is a generalization by the author of an idea often put at the basis of various claims in Moldova, particularly regarding inter-ethnic relations, language and religious matters. Examples of this sentiment can be found here: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/24781119.html>, and in the comments section here: <http://www.platzforma.md/arhive/386512>

tend to take part in the Association of Russian-Language Journalists of Moldova.²² Moreover, the topics of concern for the two groups of journalists – Romanian-speaking and Russian-speaking – often remain radically different. These divisions have led Moldova’s media community to be severely fractured and internally divided.

HRBA proposes an alternative to this overly simplistic framework for public discourse in Moldova. This approach calls on society to view majority and minority groups through a human rights lens. This perspective suggests that the dominance of the majority – ethnic, linguistic or religious – is limited by the fundamental rights and protections of minority groups. It also suggests that the majority should not impose its views and decisions onto minorities or demand their assimilation. Members of ethnic, linguistic and religious groups should not be seen as pawns in big geopolitical games, but rather as individual holders of inalienable fundamental human rights.

Conclusions: HRBA in Media Practice

HRBA is a paradigm-shifting framework capable of substantially improving the transformative potential of media work in Moldova, uniting the media community with a sense of solidarity, and strengthening the fundamental relationship between media and the country’s diverse society. A shift to HRBA would hold direct practical implications for Moldovan media.

First, this approach requires abandoning the “us and them” and “normal and abnormal” framework in media reporting. It requires departing from “us – progressive pro-Westerners” versus “them – dark and retrograde pro-Easterners.” Departing from “us – mainstream Moldovans” and “them – marginal Gagauzians or Roma.” Putting these divisive frameworks aside, media can take up the uniting framework of “our” common diverse, multidimensional and multi-normative society that embraces pro-Westerners, pro-Easterners, Moldovans, Romanians, Gagauzians, Roma, and people with diverse needs.

Second, it requires a departure from stereotypes and adopting language that demonstrates full respect for the dignity and self-agency of each person or group. This includes careful choice of terminology, as well as close attention to the perspective and framing of reporting. For example, media must stop labelling women as “the weak gender” or “hearth keepers” depicted primarily in the home or the context of childcare, while men are depicted in business and decision-making settings. Media must also avoid hosting political, analytical and/or economic (business) talk-shows that are male-dominated.

Media must change its behavior of labelling disabled persons as handicapped or deficient. They should depict them in enabling settings and include the perspectives of such people when reporting on various topics of public interest, rather than only including them in stories on health issues or charity.

Media must change its trend of presenting ethnic minorities predominantly in the context of soft cultural reporting – i.e. singing, dancing and traditional food. They should avoid highlighting ethnic or religious affiliations in the context of crime, terrorism, and any other news coverage involving violence or conflict. Coverage of the Orthodox Church in Moldova and other religious denominations in Moldova should be balanced and impartial.²³

Media should respect the self-titling of groups. Roma are not Gypsies. Ukrainians are not Khokhols. Jehovah Witnesses are not Jehovists, Baha’i are not Bahaists, etc. This extends to respect of self-titling of geographic locations in the relevant language. Comrat in Romanian, but Komrat in Gagauzian. Chişinău in Romanian, but Kishinev (Кишинев) in Russian, Kyshyniv (Кишинів) in Ukrainian, Kiszyniów in Polish and Kişinöv in Gagauzian.

HRBA demands constructively building the understanding of society’s diversity and multi-normativity. Media institutions have the power to build this understanding based on their choice of reporting topics and formats.

Third, the best way to trigger this paradigm shift and further advance the use of HRBA is through engagement of the underrepresented societal groups in media work themselves. This principle is best embodied in the words “Nothing about us, without us!” This engagement may take many forms, from adopting a policy to interview the relevant societal groups covered in the reporting material, to more advanced forms of outreach designed to engage representatives of the underrepresented groups as media co-creators (in the capacity of staff members, interns, collaborators, etc.).

These paradigm-shifting changes are totally within the power of the Moldovan media, and some organizations in Moldova are already successfully implementing such HRBA initiatives. Since 2016, the UN in Moldova has held an annual Diversity Internship Program aimed at providing individuals from under-represented groups – persons with disabilities, people living with HIV, ethno-linguistic and religious minorities – with professional internship opportunities.²⁴ A number of organizations and institutions have joined this initiative. Media institutions in Moldova can and should follow these examples. While further efforts will be necessary to raise awareness and capacity for this approach, the steps outlined in this policy paper will be a good first step.

²² The only positive example in this landscape is the Center of Independent Journalism, which works closely with both Romanian- and Russian-language media, including from Gagauzia. Its site – Media-azi.md – functions in both Romanian and Russian.

²³ “Report on Monitoring of Minority Dimension Inclusion into the Pre-Electoral Activities of Electoral Bodies, Political Parties and Mass Media,” Human Rights Information Center, May 2019, <http://mon.drepturi.md/>

²⁴ “UN House in Moldova: Diversity in Action,” UN Human Rights Office, May 2019, <https://unhumanrights.exposure.co/un-house-in-moldova-diversity-in-action>

HRBA Operationalization in Mass Media: Recommendations

HRBA in Moldovan media may be promoted simultaneously via several avenues:

- 1) Individual media institutions should consider initiating change internally, by amending their existing editorial policies and standards or adopting new ones. The Moldovan Equality Council,²⁵ specialized UN agencies, and NGOs can all serve as useful resources for improving understanding of HRBA as well as its technical implementation.
- 2) Professional media associations and self-regulatory bodies – especially the Moldovan Press Council – should mainstream this approach into professional standards and regulations for the media sector (such as the Journalistic Code of Ethics, etc.).
- 3) Public supervisory authorities – especially the Broadcasting Coordination Council – should mainstream HRBA into its monitoring regulations and activities.
- 4) Funders and donors of media programming should consider requiring implementation and mainstreaming of HRBA elements in project activities as a requirement for applicants.
- 5) Journalism and media-focused educational and training institutions should mainstream HRBA into their curricula and training programs.

25 This is an independent public body for anti-discrimination. Official website: www.egalitate.md



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