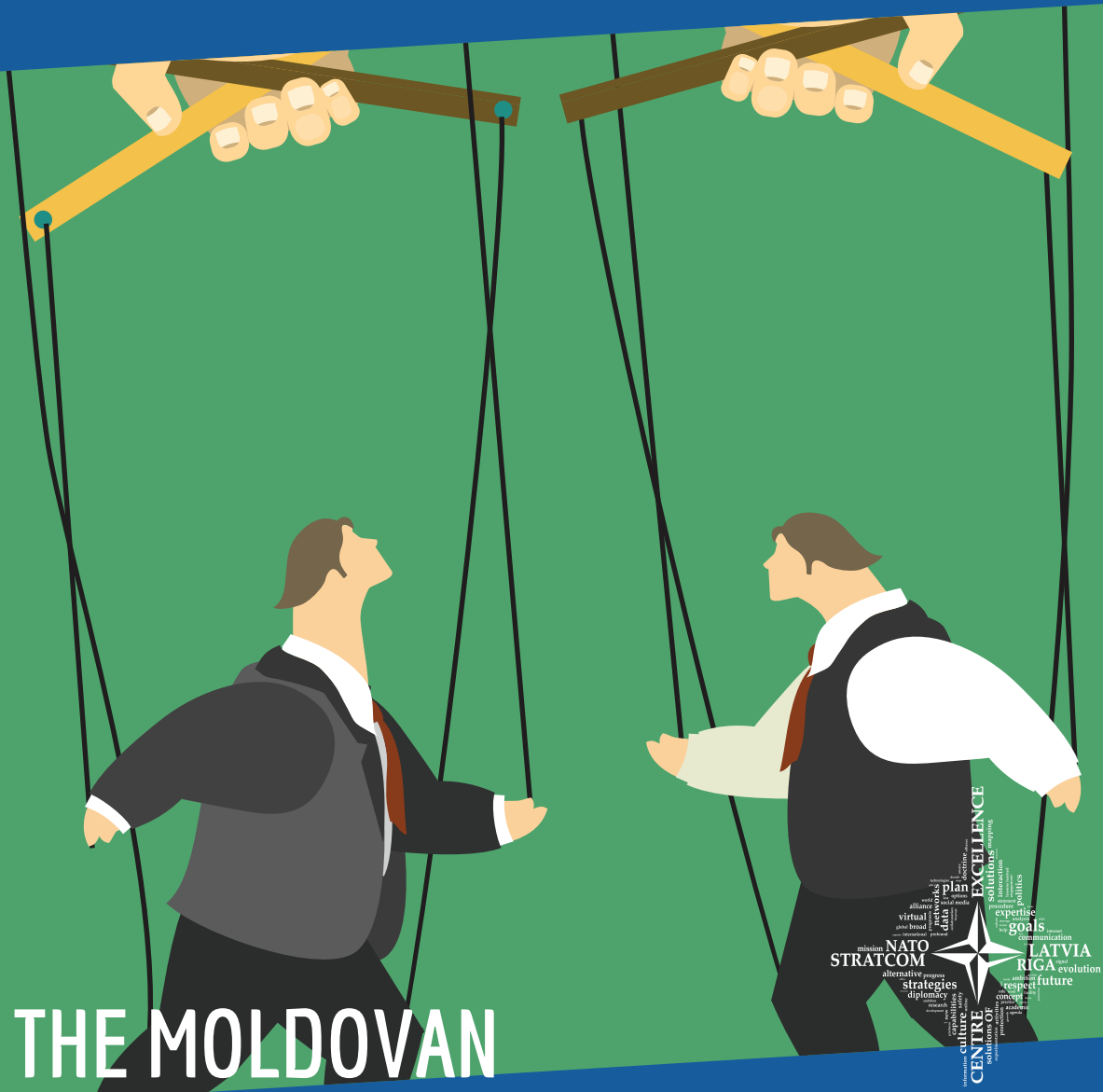


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# THE MOLDOVAN INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT, HOSTILE NARRATIVES, AND THEIR RAMIFICATIONS

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Antti Sillanpää

This study describes the current information environment of Moldova. The main focus is on how societal vulnerabilities are exploited by political actors who are following policies promoted by the Kremlin. The mechanisms linking societal vulnerabilities and people's behaviour are described here in order to better understand the Moldovan information environment, especially the Russian influence on Moldovan politics. Compared to a traditional target audience analysis, this study highlights the importance of the structure of media environment, which promotes hostile Kremlin narratives in Moldova (see picture page 5). This study assumes that societal problems are not discussed in a vacuum. Moldovans' perception of what is going on around them and the actions they take in response are shaped by the structure of and key actors in the media environment. As a result, only some topics are selected for public consumption.

The chapters that follow describe the vulnerabilities in today's Moldovan society, the divisive narratives

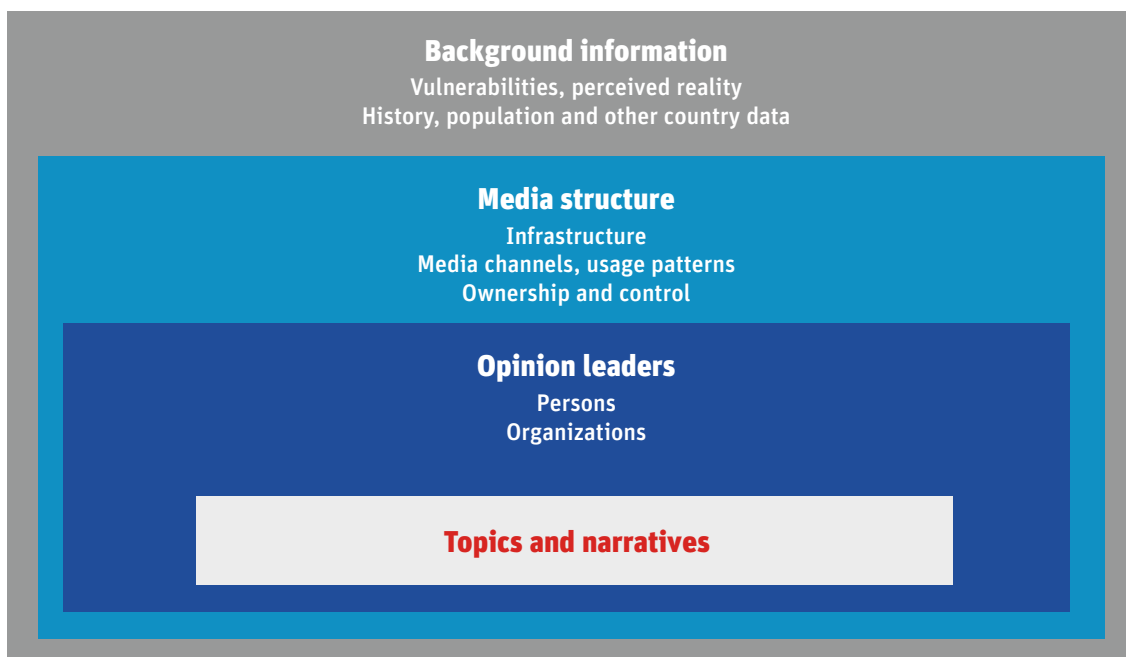
promoted by the Kremlin and its local affiliates, local media ownership and control, and the most influential opinion-leaders in Moldova. Conclusions and recommendations are given at the end of each section.

People living in Moldova today worry about their children's future, poverty, unemployment, prices, corruption, and the possibility of war.<sup>1</sup> This report highlights the importance of corruption, weak state structures, the dysfunctional political system, and the regions of Transnistria and Gagauzia as the major vulnerabilities currently faced by Moldovan society. All of these issues are closely linked to both poverty and the lack of security many people feel in the unstable political environment.

These vulnerabilities are effectively leveraged to foster mistrust and polarization. After analysing the situation, we cluster Kremlin promoted messages, speeches, videos, demonstrations, and other acts. We consider these clusters as

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1 Barometer of Public Opinion, 2016. Institute for Public Policies. Source: <http://ipp.md/lib.php?!=en&idc=156>



four identifiable hostile narratives that serve to create divisions in an already fragmented society. We have named them ‘*Russkii Mir* and Soviet Nostalgia’, ‘Federalization Will Ensure Equality’, ‘The European Union is Bad, Russia’s Customs Union is What You Need’, and ‘Romania and NATO are a Threat to Peace’. Each of these narratives targets feelings and emotions—the sense of belonging, the sense of self-determination, a sense of economic security, and a sense of physical security. Each narrative touches upon particular Moldovan vulnerabilities, but the tactics behind them can be recognised in other, similar narratives promoted by Vladimir Putin’s Kremlin in other countries along the Russian border.

The ideas in these hostile narratives overlap, sharing many of the same features. For instance, ideological conservatism supports both cultural propagation and is opposed to economic ties with the European Union. These narratives can also

be contradictory, such as the idea of *Russkii Mir*, which attempts to link the Moldovans more closely to their former Russian rulers, while federalization strategy claims to promote self-determination for the ethnic Moldovan majority. Therefore, hostile narratives are not meant as idealized truth that the audience should swallow whole. Instead, individuals pick and choose the story elements that make sense to them, like choosing dishes from a buffet. What is crucial is that people accept a portion of the misleading information, which itself is enough to deepen the wedges between the various factions of Moldovan society.

Post-Soviet narratives are a mix of residual memories, political failures, and regional conflicts. Ideological narratives affect minds and public behaviour via emotions and iconic images. The ‘*Russkii Mir* and Soviet Nostalgia’ narrative inspires unity between Moldovans and Russia on

an emotional, even spiritual, level. The idea of *Russkii Mir*, or 'the Russian world', is an ideology built on the assumption that those who speak Russian think and act like the subset of Russians currently in power. In Moldova, this manifests itself through emphasizing Russian Orthodox religion, remembering and cherishing the sacrifices made during the Great Patriotic War, and clearly distinguishing between Moldova and Romania. These are attempts to create positive feelings about influence from the East and sharing the conservative Russian mental space.

The 'Federalization Will Ensure Equality' narrative comprises acts and messages that stress the equality of different ethnic groups living in Moldova. Here Russia wants to take on the role of an alternative to the Moldovan titular group. The portrayal of Russians as the most important linguistic minority can be challenged. Not only is the size of Ukrainian population bigger, but Russians are closely followed by other groups in number. Politically, federalization might create veto-rights for the administrative areas of Transnistria and Gagauzia, which themselves are closely linked with Russia due to various historical circumstances.

The narrative 'The European Union is Bad, Russia's Customs Union is What You Need' seems to be about economics, but actually the arguments used are often based on ideological conservatism and used to create fear among Moldovans. The related Kremlin narrative, 'Romania and NATO are a Threat to Peace', leverages people's sense of insecurity.

Echoing messages from the Kremlin, some political leaders are claiming that Western expansionism is underway, or that NATO and Romania have ambitions towards the East. The narrative has produced results: a large number of Moldovans favour both Vladimir Putin and political neutrality, which suggests that these audiences do not see the risks the current Russian regime poses to the region.

These narratives are most powerfully communicated through various forms of media. Without a mechanism for the transmission of these narratives, they would have a limited audience and those sending messages would be unable to bring about changes in the behaviour of the people they seek to influence.

For the most part, the Moldovan people are only exposed to that information, which local powerbrokers or the Kremlin-controlled media want them to be aware of. At the moment Moldova has too many media outlets for them all to remain economically viable in the small Moldovan economy. This reduces the quality of the news and creates an incentive for affluent actors to promote their own agendas.

A handful of individuals in Moldova and the Kremlin are effectively dominating the news landscape. Much of the control lies in the hands of politicians or oligarchs such as Vladimir Plahotniuc, who has consolidated his business and political power structure, leveraging also his media assets. Plahotniuc plays a leading role in the pro-Western Democratic Party of Moldova, while his television channels run programming produced

by Kremlin-controlled media. Some other influential politicians and businessmen active in the media include Chiril Luchinschi, Vlad Filat, Vadim Ciubara, Victor Țopa, Dan Lozovan, Dumitru Țîra, and Ilan Shor. This report includes charts showing who controls the Moldovan media (see picture page 48) and which parties are affiliated with pro-Kremlin and Pro-Western media outlets. (see picture page 47).

The media is a pipeline that carries content. Journalists and researchers, who influence the national agenda, create the content. They are influential because audiences see and hear them actively analysing and discussing pressing issues. According to our study, some of the most influential opinion-makers were Corneliu Ciurea, Serghei Ostaf, Veaceslav Ionita, Victor Gurau, and Alexandru Cauia, who happen to be especially popular on platforms connected with Plahotniuc.

Because the situation in Moldova shows every indication of remaining challenging, there will be a constant stream of opportunities to negatively affect the fragile development of pro-Western narratives. Hostile narratives can be fine-tuned and kept alive with minimal effort. Adversarial forces needn't actively worsen the current situation, as conditions are already bad.

In the current political climate, Western values are under attack. In Moldova, neither the public sector, nor the public at large are clear about where they want to be heading. While the Kremlin is clearly leveraging



the vulnerabilities of Moldova, the population itself is divided along several lines. Self-interest, greed, and lust for power are often veiled in political rhetoric, which makes evaluating the information environment challenging. Large segments of Moldovan society are inclined to agree with messaging originating from the Kremlin,<sup>2</sup> while the pro-Western segments of the population are divided on a number of issues. The current Moldovan understanding of Western or European values is often distorted either by adversaries, or by non-credible proponents of alternative messages. There are many flag carriers for European values in Moldova, but many others exploit fears about Russia for their own benefit. In order for the voices representing truth and justice to be heard in the Moldovan information environment, the country and its people will continue to need

2 The Russian media are seen as more trustworthy than Moldovan or European media, see the Barometer of Public Opinion. Institute for Public Policy, April 2016. Source: [http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/BOP\\_04.2016\\_prima\\_parte\\_finale-r.pdf](http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/BOP_04.2016_prima_parte_finale-r.pdf) (last accessed 20 May 2016)

support from free and open societies. Adversaries can affect decision making, first by distorting the quality of information, second by controlling access to information, and third by influencing people's perception and understanding of the information they do come into contact with. There are several ways Moldova and its partners can help to protect Moldovan society along these lines.

First, there are various ways to improve information quality in Moldova. Western values can be promoted using current media structures. The political agenda of each media outlet is partly moulded by a circumscribed number of opinion leaders, many of whom are discussed in this study. Offering good journalistic content to the existing popular channels is a way to improve understanding among audiences. Adding new channels is not effective in an already saturated market. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Moldova has managed to include both Romanian and Russian language programming on Moldova's public TV and radio channels.

Second, access to information might require marketing, more attractive programming as well as technical solutions. Large segments of the Moldovan population have limited access to high-quality information. They are barely in the Moldovan media space but voluntarily rely on Kremlin news sources. It is very difficult to reach these people if they are stuck in their media habits and not used to searching for news from different sources. To find a way to break through to individuals caught in this type of

Kremlin information bubble, we should further analyse what kind of content, e.g. entertaining or journalistic, would encourage people to change their media habits. In Transnistria and Gagauzia there are even fewer opportunities to get Moldovan or Western content due to local broadcasting decisions, so reaching them requires other technical solutions.

Third, protecting perceptions and understanding is the most difficult issue to solve. Proposals for various types of co-operation projects that would bring Moldova into closer contact with the rest of Europe and provide work in Transnistria and Gagauzia are especially relevant, as they are more isolated from the West. The situation in these regions is only one symptom of the problem. As long as there is no shared national vision about present realities and the future goals, all solutions remain partial. The Moldovan authorities and citizens must bear the brunt of the responsibility for creating new opportunities and developing cohesion among the inhabitants of the country. Western support for the Moldovan people, especially for education, rule of law, functioning state structures, and quality journalism will bear fruit in the long run.

To summarize the policy recommendations, we are suggesting improving quality journalism leveraging the current media structures, targeting marketing and projects aimed at bursting pro-Kremlin information bubbles, and continued co-operation in supporting the Moldovan response to improve state vulnerabilities.



# INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Antti Sillanpää, IDIS Viitorul—Igor Munteanu, and IJC—Ion Bunduchi

This study on the Moldovan information environment focuses on how societal vulnerabilities are exploited by Moldovan and other actors who are following the Kremlin's lead. The chapters that follow discuss vulnerability, hostile Kremlin narratives, media ownership and control, and public opinion leaders. The study ends with a conclusion and recommendations. The NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence initiated and oversaw the study, while the research was carried out by the Institute for Development and Social Initiatives (IDIS Viitorul) and the Independent Journalism Center (IJC).

The Republic of Moldova has several fault lines. By ethnicity the country is 75,8% Moldovan, with 8,4% Ukrainians, 5,9% Russians, 4,4% Gagauz, 2,2% Romanians, and 1,9% Bulgarians comprising the remaining population.<sup>3</sup> Moldova was part of Romania during

the interwar period, which itself was invaded by the Soviet Union as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement. The annexation was finalized when Moldova was incorporated into the Soviet Union at the close of World War II. Although the country has been independent from Russian rule since 1991, Russian military forces have remained on Moldovan territory east of the Nistru River supporting the breakaway region of Transnistria. The Transnistrian population is composed mostly of Ukrainians and Russians, but it also has a sizable ethnic Moldovan minority.<sup>4</sup>

Domestic politics and the Moldovan vision about its international position are intertwined. Since the defeat of the Communist Party-led government in 2009, subsequent governments have attempted to increase European and Trans-Atlantic co-operation. The impetus for EU integration gained momentum with the inauguration of the Eastern Partnership Policy in May 2008.

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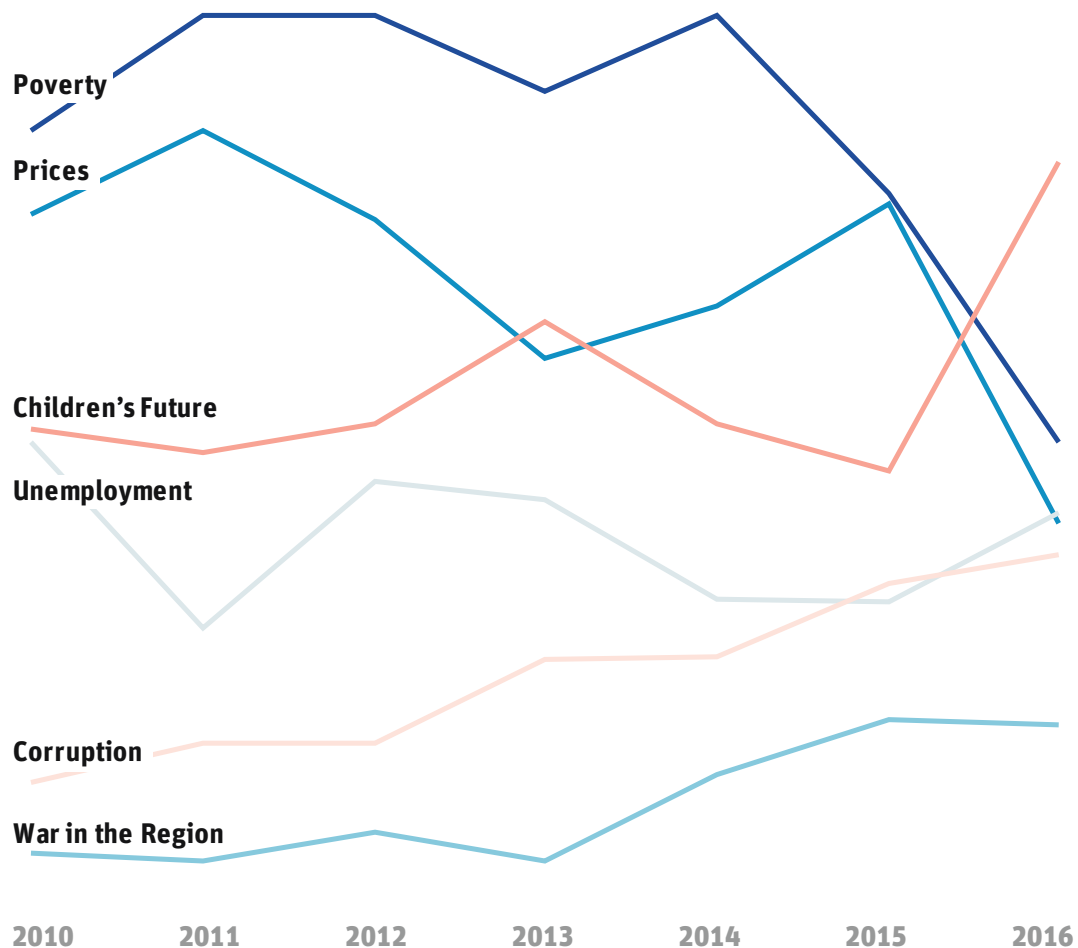
3 Source: <http://www.statistica.md/newsview.php?l=ro&id=2358&idc=168>

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4 Ibid.

**TABLE 1. WHAT WORRIES YOU THE MOST (INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY)<sup>5</sup>**

(%)



However, more recent surveys show that support for the EU has dropped from 64% in 2011 to 41% in 2016.<sup>6</sup> Only 11% of respondents in 2016 want

Moldova to join NATO. Traditionally, public support for Moldovan neutrality has been considerable and is still high in 2016 at 58%, but there is also 18% support for joining CIS security structures.<sup>7</sup> The common interpretation of these changes is that pro-European parties have widely disappointed the people. The most common reasons given are Moldova's high corruption scores, decaying

<sup>5</sup> Barometer of Public Opinion, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016. Institute for Public Policy. Source: <http://ipp.md/lib.php?l=en&idc=156>

<sup>6</sup> Barometer of Public Opinion, April 2016. Institute for Public Policies. Source: [http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/BOP\\_04.2016\\_prima\\_parte\\_finale-r.pdf](http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/BOP_04.2016_prima_parte_finale-r.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

standards of living for ordinary people, and the vested interests of affluent businesses and their close ties to governmental bodies. These conditions have resulted in the formation of alternative political groups to fill the void, and they have achieved greater popularity than the incumbent parties claiming to be pro-European.

In Moldova, right-wing parties identify themselves as carriers of Western values; they are market-oriented, open to the EU, and some are even in support of NATO integration, while the left-wing parties position themselves as pro-Russian, Christian-Orthodox, anti-Western, and pro-Customs Union with Russia. In 2015, as a result of the public revelation of banking fraud, an alternative to the leading political parties emerged on the right side of the spectrum. After many weeks of anti-government protests in Chisinau led by the civic platform Dignity and Truth, the movement later developed into the Dignity and Truth Platform Party (DA) and the Solidarity and Action Party (PAS).

The civic unrest has revealed that, for many people, the recent Moldovan governments have not been effective in solving the country's problems.

Table 1 describes the results of a survey showing that economic issues are the most pressing for the average Moldovan. The survey shows a strong emphasis on imminent problems instead of systemic problems or international issues.

# VULNERABILITIES AND MEDIA COVERAGE

IJC—Ion Bunduchi

## ABSTRACT

Moldova is facing a profound crisis. Although media institutions have, to some extent, been fulfilling their watchdog role, the country is vulnerable and freedom of the press is uncertain at best. The most influential media outlets, especially the television stations, are politically affiliated and often the personal property of politicians and influential businessmen. These media institutions exert significant influence on the public agenda, often determining which subjects are put forward according to their private interests, with no connection to the real needs of Moldovan citizens and society. The representation of issues that concern the public interest has narrowed considerably, while the representation of private, political, and/or economic interests takes centre stage. This makes it possible for politically, ideologically, or economically power-hungry stakeholders to manipulate public opinion. However, the media are not the only actors revealing

social problems. The adversaries of democratic development are also ready to exploit existing vulnerabilities. This chapter focuses on the issues of corruption, weak state structures, national politics, and the regions of Transnistria and Gagauzia. Poverty and a lack of security also largely stem from these issues.

## CORRUPTION AND WEAK STATE STRUCTURES

Moldovan society is rife with corruption, even its national security apparatus. Geopolitical risks linked to corruption were already embedded in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact when it was signed in 1939. For example, Soviet agents managed to enter Bessarabia—the historical name of a region that today comprises parts of Moldova and Ukraine—with the help of corrupt civil servants who were used to protecting their interests.<sup>8</sup>

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8 Cristian Troncotă, 'România și frontul secret', București, Editura Elion, 2007

The US State Department's 2015 Human Rights Report stated, '*The spread of corruption continues to be the most serious issue in the Republic of Moldova in terms of human rights*'.<sup>9</sup>

According to a survey of social perceptions conducted in the spring of 2016, Moldovan citizens consider the Parliament, the courts, and the government to be the most corrupt institutions in the country. The survey indicated that lack of trust in central state institutions stems from the perception that they are corrupt.<sup>10</sup>

However, as shown in Table 1, corruption is one of the lesser concerns, while the greatest worries on the minds of the people are largely generated by corrupt processes. This lack of understanding about the effects of corruption can largely be attributed to the media. News organizations have not raised public awareness sufficiently to result in popular demands to end corruption. The actions that have taken by the Moldovan authorities have largely come about due to pressure from foreign development partners. In 2011, Parliament approved the National Anticorruption Strategy for 2011–2015;<sup>11</sup> however, five years after the adoption of the strategy, a qualitative evaluation of the implementation of the strategy scored

only 43%.<sup>12</sup>

Corruption was also a topic when evaluating progress in fulfilling the commitments assumed by the Moldovan authorities under the National Action Plan for the Implementation of the Republic of Moldova-EU Association Agreement for 2014-2016. The authors of one analysis pointed out that a number of activities proposed in the National Action Plan were vaguely defined and immeasurable, such as developing and consolidating the capacity to fight corruption at high levels and in law enforcement structures.<sup>13</sup>

After monitoring sixteen media institutions for fourteen months, a report by the Independent Journalism Center on the coverage of corruption in the media stipulated that the media '*merely addressed official statements on corruption*', investigative reporting on the subject was minimal, and the investigations '*were usually not followed up by any reactions from authorities*'.<sup>14</sup>

The lack of interest in corruption in general and the dearth of investigative reporting into Moldovan corruption continue to be an issue. There are several explanations for this including (i) a partisan media unmotivated to investigate corruption cases; (ii) a limited capacity to conduct investigations (most of them are done

9 Source: <http://www.dw.com/ro/corup%C8%9Bia-a-%C3%AEngenuncheat-moldova/a-19203022>

10 Source: <http://www.dw.com/ro/corup%C8%9Bia-a-%C3%AEngenuncheat-moldova/a-19203022>

11 Source: <http://lex.justice.md/md/340429/>

12 Source: <http://anticoruptie.md/ro/stiri/strategia-nationala-anticoruptie-ineficienta-din-cauza-incoerentelor-si-contradictiilor>

13 Source: [http://expert-grup.org/ro/biblioteca/item/download/1436\\_231b054237558ba-feccd893eca22480b](http://expert-grup.org/ro/biblioteca/item/download/1436_231b054237558ba-feccd893eca22480b)

14 Source: [http://ijc.md/Publicatii/coruptie/raport\\_final\\_coruptie\\_rom.pdf](http://ijc.md/Publicatii/coruptie/raport_final_coruptie_rom.pdf)

with outside financial support), and (iii) an inadequate reaction or lack of reaction on the part of authorities once they had been notified of an instance of corruption.

## A DYSFUNCTIONAL POLITICAL SYSTEM

Moldovan society has had to accommodate diverse actors making it '*pluralistic by default*'.<sup>15</sup> However, pluralism has not led to efficient governance. In an attempt to increase powers of the parliament compared to the President, the Moldovan Parliament voted to change the governmental system from semi-presidential to parliamentary in 2000. This success of the vote turned the office of President into a largely ceremonial position. In 2016, after a controversial ruling by the Constitutional Court, Moldova brought back presidential elections by popular vote. Once again, the checks and balances in Moldovan politics will undergo changes in ways that remain to be seen.

There are 44 political parties registered in Moldova.<sup>16</sup> About half of them are oriented toward Russia, while the other half consider themselves to be aligned with European values. Political parties with opposing platforms have often polarized Moldovan society and the media into proponents of either Eastern or Western paths for development. In this situation, it is

difficult to imagine that a coalition government capable of mobilizing Moldovan society to overcome its vulnerabilities will easily come to power. Although the EU Association Agreement was signed in the summer of 2014, Moldovan authorities demonstrated difficulties to cope with the commitments they had undertaken. A report was published on 31 March revealing that the implementation of the Association Agreement stood at 46%,<sup>17</sup> and the implementation of the National Action Plan for 2015–2016 stood at 23.9%.<sup>18</sup> This lack of demonstrable progress has largely been influenced by the ongoing government crises.

The credibility of government authorities in the eyes of Moldovan citizens has fallen dramatically. A survey conducted in April 2016 indicated that trust in the two parties that make up the governing coalition—the Democratic Party (PDM) and the Liberal Party (PL)—was at 8% and 6% respectively, while the most trusted parties were both pro-Kremlin—the Party of Socialists enjoys a 30% confidence rating, while Our Party (PN) trails slightly with 29%.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, pro-Kremlin parties have become influential by openly showing hostility toward the EU, including Romania, and are able to generate and maintain tensions in society.

17 Source: <http://www.expert-grup.org/ro/activitate/comunicate-de-presa/item/1172-comunicat-euromonitor-aa&category=188>

18 Government Decision No. 808, 7 October 2014, Source: [http://mec.gov.md/sites/default/files/planul\\_national\\_de\\_actiuni\\_pentru\\_implementarea\\_aa\\_rm-ue\\_2014-2016.pdf](http://mec.gov.md/sites/default/files/planul_national_de_actiuni_pentru_implementarea_aa_rm-ue_2014-2016.pdf)

19 Source: [http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/BOP\\_04.2016\\_prima\\_parte\\_finale-r.pdf](http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/BOP_04.2016_prima_parte_finale-r.pdf)

15 This term is attributed to Lucan Way, who employed it in 'Pluralism by Default in Moldova', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.13, Number 4, October 2002, pp. 127-144

16 Source: <http://www.justice.gov.md/pageview.php?l=ro&idc=212&id=780>





Political instability led to social instability and finally generated massive protests against the authorities. In the spring of 2015 tens of thousands of people participated in protests organized by the civic platform Dignity and Truth. In September, the members of the protest platform reorganised into a political party and announced that they would organise non-stop protests until changes were made. The platform is enthusiastically supported by the TV station *Jurnal*, but equally denigrated by the stations aligned with Democratic Party leader Vlad Plahotniuc. The way these events were reported reveals how the media are divided along party lines. Some of the headlines broadcast on *Publika TV*, *Prime TV*, *Canal 2*, and the portal *publika.md* included: *'Be vigilant with the Sunday protest! The DT Platform prepares for bloodshed'*, *'Incredible! The DT Platform ready to literally fight for power'*,<sup>20</sup> *'They came, they criticized, and they left. DT*

20 Source: <http://www.publika.md/cauta/?cx=partner-pub-9476046694301239%3Aofjnr-d8h0&cof=FORID%3A10&ie=UTF-8&q=platforma+DA&x=0&y=0>

*Platform rejects dialogue suggested by president Nicolae Timofti, speaker of the Parliament Andrian Candu, and prime minister Valeriu Strelet'*.<sup>21</sup> *Jurnal TV* and the internet portal *jurnal.md* responded with heavy criticism of Vladimir Plahotniuc: *'Andrei Nastase: In order to denigrate the DT platform, Plahotniuc pays mercenaries, paedophiles, and losers from the media across the Prut River using the money from the stolen billion'*, *'Deputy Maria Ciobanu: Moldova was transformed by LLC Plahotniuc'*, *'Plahotniuc and bouts of rabies'*.<sup>22</sup>

The information portal *politics.md* is closely affiliated with the authorities and has posted news items creating suspicion about intentional actions aimed at discrediting DT: *'From actions against the authorities, the DT Platform has started acting against citizens!'*.<sup>23</sup> *'The DT Platform: Trojan Horse of Russia at the EU gates'*,<sup>24</sup> and *'Russian agents have infiltrated the DT Platform! The Topa brothers'* *Jurnal* was writing about them back in 2009'.<sup>25</sup>

The portal *sputnik.md* is a branch of the multimedia news agency *Sputnik* in Russia and published stories against the DT platform although it has not announced any political affiliation.

21 Source: <http://www.publika.md/cauta/?cx=partner-pub-9476046694301239%3Aofjnr-d8h0&cof=FORID%3A10&ie=UTF-8&q=platforma+DA&x=0&y=0>

22 Source: <http://jurnal.md/ro/politic/>

23 Source: <http://politics.md/?view=articles&id=6037>

24 Source: <http://politics.md/?view=articles&id=7522>

25 Source: <http://www.politics.md/?view=articles&id=7532>

Some of its headlines include: *'The DT Platform, a tool in the fights between oligarchs'*, *'The DT Platform is in zugzwang'* [at a disadvantage], and *'Andrei Nastase [DT frontman] to enter Parliament or prison?'*<sup>26</sup> The headlines demonstrate the intention to distract the people's attention from the essence of the protests. It should be noted that the DT platform includes calls to reform the justice system, fight corruption, and reform the financial-banking system to recover 'the stolen billion'—all priority actions for Chisinau also suggested by European bodies.<sup>27</sup> The Moldovan political parties have managed to turn the media outlets they control into mouthpieces for party interests instead of addressing the vulnerabilities of society.

## THE TRANSNISTRIAN REGION

Since 1992 there has been a frozen armed conflict in the Transnistrian region of the Moldova. Transnistria has declared its independence and its orientation toward the Russian Federation. In autumn of 2006, the local Transnistrian authorities organized a referendum seemingly demonstrating vast majority support for independence from Moldova and joining the Russian Federation. Neither Moldova nor the international community recognized the referendum.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Source: <http://sputnik.md/search/?query=platforma+DA>

<sup>27</sup> Source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34244341>; <http://www.euronews.com/2015/09/06/moldovans-protest-over-banking-scandal-in-a-rare-show-of-defiance>

<sup>28</sup> Source: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2007/transnistria>

Memorandum of  
collaboration between  
Russian Federation  
and Transnistrian  
Media Service.

In 2014, immediately after the illegal referendum in Crimea, the Transnistrian region also asked the Russian Federation to 'consider the possibility' of absorbing Transnistria. This wish was reiterated by the Transnistrian leader Evgheni Șevciuk in Tiraspol on May 9, 2016 after the traditional military parade marking the occasion of the 71<sup>st</sup> anniversary of World War II, or the Great Patriotic War, which included for the first time the participation of 36 Russian military units from the task force deployed on the left bank of the Nistru River. Șevciuk told journalists, *'I think that sooner or later, but it would be better if it is sooner, we will live in one country'*,<sup>29</sup> referring to Russia.

Many media institutions in the Transnistrian region are strongly influenced by the local authorities and are largely hostile to Chisinau. Transnistrian authorities control public media through the State

<sup>29</sup> Source: <http://deschide.md/ro/news/social/27177/FOTO--Parad%C4%83-la-Tiraspol--%C8%98evciuk-sper%C4%83-c%C4%83-%C3%AEntr-o-zi-va-tr%C4%83i-%C3%AEntr-un-stat-unit-cu-Rusia.htm>



Media Service. Editorial policy is coordinated with Moscow through the Ministry of Communications of the Russian Federation with which the Transnistrian service signed a memorandum of collaboration in 2014. It stipulates the ‘*implementation of joint projects and programs in the field of communications, information technologies and media*’ and ‘*supporting Russian and Transnistrian media in publishing information about the friendship between the two parties*’.<sup>30</sup> Media outlets on the left bank of the Nistru, such as the portal *novostipmr.com*, almost always classify news about Moldova under the rubric ‘International’. This is a propaganda method used to spread the idea that the Transnistrian region and Moldova are two different countries.<sup>31</sup> The portal posts political news items about Moldova that, despite covering controversial topics, are written almost solely on the basis of a single source of information—the ruling party. The rare exceptions when two sources are used do not alter the situation. For instance, a news item published in January 2016 referred to the meeting of a Transnistrian representative, Vitali Ignatiev, with Pirkka Tapiola, Head of the EU Delegation to Chisinau. The story was 474 words long. A single eleven-word statement was quoted from the Head of the EU Delegation, while the ten statements quoted from Vitali Ignatiev comprised 240 words.

30 Source: <http://pan.md/rassledovanie/sherifyi-pridnestrovskih-smi->

31 Source: <http://mediacritica.md/studiu-de-caz-nr-1-elemente-de-propaganda-dezinformare-si-de-razboi-informatiional-in-spatul-mediatic-autohton/>

Even though two sources are quoted, the story contained an obvious informational imbalance.<sup>32</sup>

Cable television is very popular in the Transnistrian region, as it is in Moldova. According to the data available on *nistru.net*, the digital package offered by the main left bank cable operator *Interdnestrcom* includes two right bank television stations—*ProTV Chişinău* and *Publika TV*, three Transnistrian TV stations—*Pervii Pridnestrovskii*, *TSV*, and *BTv* from Bender, and 85 stations from the Russian Federation. The share of TV stations broadcasting in the Russian language (local, international, and Russia-based) is over 98%.

The media on the right bank of the Nistru cover the Transnistrian region only sporadically, e.g. on the occasion of negotiations in the ‘5+2 format’ (Moldova, Transnistria, Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE, with the EU and the US), meetings of the Joint Control Commission, or when tensions between political parties flare up. Most often, journalists rely on official sources of information. The Moldovan authorities do not encourage the media to address issues concerning Transnistria. This is usually done by foreign donors as part of media projects; however, these projects end when the funding ends. A good example is the series *Bridges* produced in 2014 and 2015 by the national public radio station *Radio Moldova* and the state-funded *Radio 1* station in Tiraspol as part of a project

32 Source: <http://mediacritica.md/studiu-de-caz-nr-2-elemente-de-propaganda-dezinformare-si-de-razboi-informatiional-in-spatul-mediatic-autohton/>

supported by the Council of Europe.<sup>33</sup> After the completion of the project, no budgetary resources were allocated to continue the programming.

## THE AUTONOMOUS TERRITORIAL UNIT GAGAUZ YERI

Along with the Transnistrian region, another major area of vulnerability is the profoundly pro-Kremlin autonomous region of Gagauzia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the separatist movement Gagauz Halki was established with support from Moscow. In December 1990 the separatists proclaimed the Gagauz Republic to consist of three districts in the south of Moldova—Comrat, Ceadar-Lunga, and Vulcanesti. At the end of 1994, the Moldovan Parliament acknowledged the autonomy of the Gagauz region, and granted it special status in the constitution. The autonomous region often defies the central Moldovan authorities and opposes European facets of development. In February 2014, a referendum was held in Gagauzia in which 98% of the inhabitants voted to join the Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan Customs Union. Separatist tendencies, supported by Russia, have increased in Gagauzia along with the unfolding crisis in Ukraine. One example of this is the exception made for Gagauzia in the embargo on Moldovan wine and agricultural products—a ban imposed by Russia in response to Moldova entering into an Association

Agreement with the EU.<sup>34</sup>

Regional elites have often challenged Moldovan legislation on issues such as anti-discrimination law<sup>35</sup> and rebroadcasting limitations of Russian-based TV Programs.<sup>36</sup> The regional public radio broadcaster, *Teleradio-Gagauzia*, is influenced by political pressure, and the private broadcasters, newspapers, and online press are largely politically affiliated. For this reason the regional media cover events in a way that suits the ambitions of the local political leaders rather than the information needs of the population. Media experts consider the portal *gagauzinfo.md* to be a relatively balanced news source, given that it publishes information concerning all the events in the region, the country, and abroad without filtering or commenting on them as other media institutions do. But even this portal demonstrates its sympathies and prejudices, especially in how the news is presented and the visibility of certain topics. For instance, in May 2015 the Gagauzia district of Ceadar-Lunga received a fire truck as a gift from the UK, as well as an ambulance and a fire truck as gifts from the Moscow regional government.

33 Source: <http://trm.md/ru/mosti-podurile/mosti-podurile-din-27-iulie-2014/?p=1>

34 Deutsche Welle, 'Gagauzia: A new stumbling block for Moldova', Source: <http://www.dw.com/en/gagauzia-a-new-stumbling-block-for-moldova/a-18333303>

35 On 30 April 2013 the regional assembly of Gagauzia approved a bill to forbid the 'propaganda' of homosexuality, bisexuality, and transsexualism such as same-sex marriage and adoption by same-sex couples.

36 The autonomous region of Gagauzia will keep broadcasting all TV channels, RIA Novosti, 12 July 2016.



The portal covered both events. In the first case the heading was *'Ceadar-Lunga received the gift of a fire truck with the steering wheel on the right side'*.<sup>37</sup> The news item was 217 words long and included a picture. In the second case, the headline read *'Ceadar-Lunga received an ambulance and a fire truck as gifts from the Moscow regional government'*. The story was 460 words long and included videos and 17 pictures.<sup>38</sup> Unlike other media outlets in the autonomy, the portal publishes stories under the rubric *'Gagauzia between the European Union and the Customs Union'*.<sup>39</sup> However, a simple count of the news items published in 2015 yields twenty stories about the European Union vs. fifty about the Customs Union.

According to a survey conducted at the end of 2015, over 90% of the population preferred watching TV news programs in Russian and only

slightly more than 2% preferred Romanian-language news.<sup>40</sup> In the case of radio, the share of those who listen to the news in Russian was 97%. All in all, 83% of respondents trusted media from Russia, 43% trusted media from Moldova, and 21% trusted media from the Transnistrian region. The media from Romania, the EU, and Ukraine enjoyed levels of trust that varied between 6% and 14%. A total of 95% of the respondents declared positive attitudes toward Russia, 74% supported Turkey, while 44% declared their sympathies for Ukraine, 27% supported Romania, and 20% were positively toward the EU. Less than 20% had a positive attitude toward the USA, and less than 10% had a positive attitude toward NATO.

The Chisinau media rarely cover Gagauz issues. The national broadcaster *Teleradio-Moldova* broadcasts a series of radio programs—*Bucaan dalgasinda*<sup>41</sup>—and TV programs—*Gagauz ogea*<sup>42</sup>—that originated during Soviet times, but as in the past, their content is limited to 'neutral' subjects such as customs and traditions. The 'hot topics' concerning relations between central and regional authorities are missing and are avoided in the other programs on *Teleradio-Moldova*.

37 Source: <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=25161>

38 Source: <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=25202>

39 Source: <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?do=cat&category=s3>

40 Survey on the level of integration of the TAU Gagauzia and the Taraclia District into the society of the Republic of Moldova, Sorce: [http://ipp.md/public/files/Evenimente/Sondaj\\_Gagauzia\\_-\\_Taraclia\\_draft\\_ro.pdf](http://ipp.md/public/files/Evenimente/Sondaj_Gagauzia_-_Taraclia_draft_ro.pdf).

41 Source: <http://trm.md/ro/program-actualitati/>

42 Source: <http://trm.md/ro/tv-program/>

## CONCLUSIONS

Media institutions in a democracy represent the vital centre of public life<sup>43</sup> while *'freedom of the press and freedom of expression in general are essential for the protection and development of democracy'*.<sup>44</sup> In fragile democracies, such as the Republic of Moldova, the media itself is weak. Instead of strengthening democracy, media influence is often trivial, or, conversely, might even be used to propagate anti-democratic values.

Manipulation, disinformation, internal and external propaganda, the rush of sensationalism, public televised battles between media institutions—all these professional deficiencies can be found everywhere in the Moldovan media environment; they reduce its credibility, erode the quality of information, increase the danger of disorienting the public, and, finally, affect the consolidation of democracy in Moldova. The right to free information, freedom of expression, and freedom of the press is universally acknowledged, but the right to truthful information is less often examined.

The vulnerabilities Moldovan society is facing today are systemic in character. They can be minimized only through systemic reforms in which the media should play

an essential role. Otherwise, the currently entrenched vulnerabilities will continue to represent a major threat to the country's sovereignty and independence.

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43 Coman, Mihai, Introduction to the media system, Polirom Printing House, Bucharest, 1999, p. 62.

44 The role of the media in the crisis of contemporary democracy and in the conditions of globalization. Source: <http://www.fisd.ro/art/Massmedia.html>

# HOSTILE NARRATIVES AND PROPAGANDA

IDIS Viitorul—Igor Munteanu

## ABSTRACT

This chapter describes four Kremlin narratives that are hostile to Moldovan sovereignty, namely '*Russkii Mir* and Soviet Nostalgia', 'Federalization Will Ensure Equality', 'The European Union is Bad, Russia's Customs Union is What You Need', and 'Romania and NATO are a Threat to Peace'. These narratives overlap and are often contradictory and contain lies. Still, they share some basic principles—they leverage Moldovan vulnerabilities, touch the emotions of different local audiences, and attempt to develop mistrust toward modern Western countries and Trans-Atlantic values and relationships.

## EXPLAINING KREMLIN NARRATIVES ABOUT MOLDOVA

Post-Soviet narratives describe a complex mix of residual memories, political failures, and regional conflicts. Most people born in the Soviet Union inherited habits and patterns from that era, which can be revived by nostalgia, or bad luck, or fear of

instability that often transgressing generational frontiers. Thus, by using familiar elements from their collective Soviet memories, skilful foreign actors can engage with other post-Soviet populations to shape their emotional preferences as part of a larger strategic project. Ideological narratives affect minds and public behaviour via emotions and iconic images.

Kremlin narratives in Moldova are infused with geopolitical rifts, based on linguistic, cultural, and political polarization. Many Moldovans appreciate the Russian Orthodox Patriarch and Vladimir Putin, who has 65% popularity in domestic Moldovan polls.<sup>45</sup> In comparison, the approval ratings are 79% for the Church, 42% for the media, and 47% for the local authorities according to a 2016 IPP poll.<sup>46</sup>

Several of the countries occupied or controlled by the former Soviet Union are vulnerable to influence due to

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45 IPP, Opinion Barometer April, 2016, Source: [www.ipp.md](http://www.ipp.md)

46 Public Opinion Barometer (BOP), IPP, Source: <http://ipp.md/libview.php?l=ro&idc=156&id=773&parent=0>



complicity between groups of oligarchs who are interested in preserving their grip on economic and political power, as well as affluent foreign actors, feeding this complicity with attractive benefits.<sup>47</sup> Also, Russian pop-icons, singers, actors, films, writers, lawyers, *Sputnik*, *RT*, *NTV*, *RTR*, and *ORT* all strengthen the Russian cultural footprint in Moldova. Pro-Russia parties, NGOs, cultural centers, and Orthodox parishes often join existing networks and coalitions, or create new ones to advocate for policies favourable to Russia. 'Rewiring' old connections revitalizes hostile narratives and keeps target audiences alert to new messages coming in. Sometimes these connections result in odd combinations of friends, strange bedfellows. In 2011-13, priests of the Mitropolia of Moldova were joining ranks of the Party of Communists (PCRM), and jointly opposed the anti-discrimination law. Later they followed the Party of Socialists and some of its former adversaries, under the re-invented symbol, the Ribbon of St. George (*Георгиевская лента*).<sup>48</sup>

47 RFERL, 5.05.2017, Petru Macovei, Petru Macovei: Autoritățile noastre nu se ocupă de problema propagandei rusești în Republica Moldova'. Source: <http://www.europalibera.org/content/article/27715838.html>

48 The Ribbon of St. George is one of the political markers that has recently migrated into Moldovan politics. The ribbon lacked any sort of public relevance, until the Kremlin decided to use it in response to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. Now, any organisation that relies on funding from Moscow must wear the Ribbon as a symbol of loyalty to Kremlin, campaigning with it during various memorial celebrations, and in that way paying tribute to the ambitions of Russia to use the war memory as political capital. In response, pro-Western parties are publicly dismissive of the Russian symbol, claiming that it carries an imperial meaning, subversive to the idea of independent statehood everywhere in the post-Soviet space. This creates a kind of dual political reality with multiple ideological tangents.

## NARRATIVE #1: RUSSKII MIR AND SOVIET NOSTALGIA

The Russian narrative on compatriots is expressed in the doctrine Moscow elites call '*Russkii Mir*' or the Russian world, which is built on the assumption that those who speak Russian and think in Russians, also act like Russians do. This concept was introduced in the Russian Foreign Policy Review in 2008,<sup>49</sup> and then developed in the 2013 Russian Foreign Policy Concept, consisting of specific priority areas, such as: (1) Protecting the interests of Overseas Compatriots (citizens of the former Soviet Union), (2) consular issues, (3) human rights issues, and (4) cooperation in culture, education, and science. On 31 August 2008 Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said, '*There are regions in which Russia has a privileged interest. [...] We will pay particular attention to our work in this region [...] Ukraine, Moldova, and undoubtedly the South Caucasus are high on the priority list*'.<sup>50</sup>

Many in Russia have a deep sense of entitlement to interfere in regions formerly controlled or occupied by the Soviet Union. This sort of thinking is revealed in Putin's casual remark that the Soviet Union was, in essence, '*Russia, just under a*

49 Russian Federation's Foreign Policy Review, 2013. Source: [http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186](http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186). Accessed on May 1, 2016.

50 Source: [http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2008/08/31/1850\\_type82912type82916\\_206003.shtml](http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2008/08/31/1850_type82912type82916_206003.shtml)

*different name*'.<sup>51</sup> Major General L. Shershnev concurred with this statement, '*Russia campaigns for the re-collection of the Russian people*'.<sup>52</sup> The *Russkii Mir* doctrine carries two basic meanings—one is the value model, which constructs Russia as a civilization separate from the West and based on traditional values, Slavic myths, philosophy, and the arts, while the other is a prescriptive model, which attempts to replace old Russia with a new Russia, emerging from the ruins of the former Soviet Union. Some promoters of *Russkii Mir* think that war in Ukraine has improved the impact of their messaging. As Sergey Panteleev, Director of the Institute of Russians Abroad, remarked, '*Until the tragic events in Ukraine, the concept of Russkii Mir was to some extent an academic exercise; now these values can mobilize people to accept the highest sacrifices*'.<sup>53</sup>

The activities of the Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots have included contesting bans on some Russian media and other decisions made by the Moldovan authorities, including grievances concerning education and statements about Russians not being given top positions in Moldovan power structures.



In 2014 alone, the Council held twenty seminars and dozens of roundtable discussions with the specific aim of identifying injustices that affect Russian-speakers.<sup>54</sup> Overall, pro-Russian groups promote the idea of 'equal nations living in Moldova', support the imperative for bilingualism, and demand that Russian be given official status (*gossudarstvennyi iazik*),<sup>55</sup> recognized in the Constitution, not merely considered a 'language of interpersonal communication'. Above all, they represent and articulate the views of other 'ethnic groups' [non-Moldovans] in Moldova.<sup>56</sup>

51 VG. Interview given by Vladimir Putin on the three federal TV channels, 18 November 2011. Source: <http://www.vg-news.ru/news-intervyu-putina-trem-federalnym-kanalam-polnyi-tekst>.

52 Общественный фонд «Русские» Соотечественники за рубежом получают «карту русского»- <http://www.kp.md/daily/article/516850/?cp=6>

53 Source: <http://krorm.ru/news/sootchestvenniki/765-russkiy-mir-kultura-i-civilizaciya.html>

54 Pravotsentr v Moldove. Михаил СИДОРОВ, руководитель информационно-аналитического правозащитного центра. Подробная информация о деятельности правозащитного центра содержится также на сайте: [www.Pravotentr.ru](http://www.Pravotentr.ru)

55 Source: <http://regnum.ru/news/polit/882693.html>

56 Russians represent 5% of the population in Moldova; largest national minority is represented by Ukrainians – 8,6%, Gagauz – 4,5%, Bulgarians – 2,1%, titular group (Moldovans) represent 76%.

Moscow's historical narrative about Moldova seeks to exploit the deep divisions present in Moldovan society—not only among Russian-speaking Gagauz, Bulgarian, Russian, and Ukrainian minorities, but also among ethnic Moldovans. One of the schisms arises from the 'Moldovenist' proposal supporting a 'distinct nation of Moldovans, separated ethnically from Romanians'.<sup>57</sup> For many 'Romanianists' there is no such separation.

There are a number of pro-Kremlin organizations active in Moldova including Antifa, Voievod, RedFront, and Grenada. These organizations have considerable resources, access to Russian-controlled state media holdings, and promote various messages activities favourable to *Russkii Mir* policies.<sup>58</sup> For instance, Grenada represents a large media portal that styles itself as the mouthpiece for 'the truest left-wing ideological youth movement in Moldova'. The so-called RedFront, where several radical Russian-speaking youth groups mix with a diverse composition of former military servicemen and intelligence officers, and cultural, business, and media groups that see themselves as pro-Russian. They include former KGB leaders, such as Anatol Plugaru and Ion Mahu, and other former ideologues, who identify themselves as ethnic Moldovans, but are pro-

Russian ideologically.<sup>59</sup>

The leaders of these pro-Kremlin organisations support the Russian annexation of Crimea. The Congress of Russian Communities informed the Ukrainian President that it would defend its Russian compatriots in Ukraine and that the '*Congress [of Russian Communities] can send more than 4000 well-trained fighters to cool the heads of the radical nationalists*'.<sup>60</sup>

The Kremlin's efforts to keep Transnistria out Moldova's constitutional space has created a situation where thousands of Transnistrians, Russian citizens, work and live in Moldova without residential rights, while thousands of Moldovans, willing to work in Russia, are turned back from the Russian border accused of having violated the passport regime. In 2014, Russian Consular Officers confirmed there more than 200 000 Moldovan citizens have been banned from entering Russia, thus increasing the unease among Moldovans willing to work there.<sup>61</sup> This situation has reduced the value of the Moldovan passport in comparison

57 В.Боршевич, Унионизм превратился в прибыльный бизнес, Молдавские ведомости, 25 марта 2015ю

58 Sputnik Молдова Source: <http://ru.sputnik.md/society/20160325/5501928.html#ixzz441M4Um8m>

59 Grenada. Source: [http://www.grenada.md/post/VETERANI\\_SILOVIH\\_STRUKTUR\\_MOLDOVI\\_ZAIAVILI\\_NATO\\_NAM\\_NE\\_NADO](http://www.grenada.md/post/VETERANI_SILOVIH_STRUKTUR_MOLDOVI_ZAIAVILI_NATO_NAM_NE_NADO)

60 Председатель Конгресса русских общин Молдавии, лидер Общественно-политического движения «Равноправие» Валерий Клименко, Центральное информационное агентство Новороссии, <http://www.e-news.su/news/10438-russkaya-obschina-moldovy-turchinovu-ostanovite-boyny-ili-my-dvinemysya-na-vostok.html>

61 Official statistics indicate that in 2014 over 540.000 of Moldovans (i.e. Transnistrians) worked in Russia, while 200.000 were suspect to extradition. Source: <http://unimedia.info/stiri/Circa-240.000-de-moldoveni-ar-putea-fi-deportai-din-Rusia-74894.html>



to Russian identity documents. A Russian passport brings benefits to those who hold one, including long-term visas, automatic labour permits, entrepreneurship rights, social benefits, free medical insurance, and free education in Russia. All those who identify themselves as Russian are eligible, including anyone *'who shares the basic tenets of Russian culture, its spiritual power and language, who connects his/her destiny with that of Russian civilization, and who regards Russia as the center of the Russian World'*.<sup>62</sup>

Education has been used as a tool for these policies. The first distance-learning centre in the CIS was created in Moldova in 2005 with funds from the Russian Federation, designed specifically to connect local students with Russian universities. Annually, Russia allocates at least 220 scholarships to students from Moldova.<sup>63</sup>

For the ideological *Russkii Mir* community, the remembrance of war and religion are intertwined concepts. The Christian Church is very popular in Moldova, which is why Moscow is keen to use its outstanding networks of loyal parishes to spread political discourse. A powerful segment of the Orthodox clergy was educated through the Russian Orthodox Patriarchy's theological seminary. Many of these individuals become culturally russified, and are, therefore, willing to promote the ideological thesis that 'Russia is the third Rome',

62 Odnarodnya. Source: <http://m.odnarodyna.org/content/karta-russkogo>

63 Source: [www.Ava.md](http://www.Ava.md), 15 February 2013.



after Rome itself and Constantinople.<sup>64</sup> The Russian Patriarch is often drawn out on various topics of political proselytism, which include delicate foreign policy issues, the effects of globalization, and the clash of civilizations. For instance, the reaction of the Russian Church to the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas mirrored the Kremlin's views and decisions.

The Orthodox Church attaches great value to its role in combating Western expansion and 'foreign, non-Christian influences' on Moldovan believers. When the Moldovan Parliament adopted the Law on Equal Opportunities in 2011, some church-affiliated groups launched protests. The protests lasted long after the adoption of the anti-discrimination laws, and were intertwined with anti-government and anti-EU criticism and

64 Poe, Marshall. "Izobretenie kontseptsii "Moskva—Tretii Rim." Ab Imperio. Teoriia i istoriia natsional'nostei i natsionalizma v postsovetском prostranstve 1: 2 (2000), 61-86.)

public demonstrations.<sup>65</sup> Some of the Christian Orthodox Synod high-ranked priests were actively involved in this campaign, which was initiated by the Party of Communists of Moldova (PCRM).<sup>66</sup> The Church plays a crucial role in Russian narratives, spreading the Kremlin's messages while fostering the appearance of neutrality.

Remembering World War Two, or the Great Patriotic War, is an effective way to recreate Kremlin narratives. All initiatives attempting to evaluate the damage done to Moldova by the Soviet occupation have received a strong reaction from Moscow.<sup>67</sup> These initiatives included a decree 'On establishing an official holiday in remembrance of the Soviet Occupation' and the intention to open a Museum of Soviet Occupation. Pro-Kremlin forces claim that instead of working for welfare, modernization, and economic growth for their citizens<sup>68</sup>, Moldovan politicians still prefer to fight communism, dismantle Soviet monuments, and contest

Russian influence. In this regard, the pro-Kremlin forces do not differentiate between the 'Russophobic policies of the Baltic and Moldovan leaders'.<sup>69</sup> Pro-Kremlin parties affirm that '*calling for the liberation of Bessarabia from Romanian rule tantamount to occupation*'<sup>70</sup> is an attempt to distort the truth and view the liberation mission of the Soviet Union and the Red Army in a negative light. In addition, they claim that talking about '*the occupation, portrays Russian-speakers as "occupants", denies them equality with ethnic Moldovans, and educates young Moldovans to be "enemies of Russia"*'.<sup>71</sup>

## NARRATIVE #2: FEDERALISATION WILL ENSURE EQUALITY

It would be expedient for Kremlin policies if Moldova changed its constitutional unitary state into a federation of two or three subjects. Some fear that federalization could be a way to increase the Kremlin's control over Moldovan domestic and external priorities due to its close connections with Transnistria and Gagauzia. So

65 RFERL, Church Pressures Moldova's Government To Repeal Antidiscrimination Laws. Source: <http://www.rferl.org/content/moldova-gay-church-rights-discrimination-laws/25024061.html>

66 OSF, Viorel Ursu, How the European Union Persuaded Moldova to Fight Discrimination, July 9, 2012. Source: <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/how-european-union-persuaded-moldova-fight-discrimination>

67 Russian beyond the headlines: FM criticizes proposal to open 'Soviet occupation' museum in Moldova. September 23, 2015, Interfax. Source: [http://rbth.com/news/2015/09/23/foreign\\_ministry\\_criticizes\\_proposal\\_to\\_open\\_soviet\\_occupation\\_museum\\_in\\_49494.html](http://rbth.com/news/2015/09/23/foreign_ministry_criticizes_proposal_to_open_soviet_occupation_museum_in_49494.html)

68 Gzt. Source: <http://gzt.md/article/%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0/22946/>

69 Gzt. Source: Выход из СССР обошелся Прибалтике дороже «советской оккупации», Source: [http://gzt.md/article/%D0%B2\\_%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%B5/22945/](http://gzt.md/article/%D0%B2_%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%B5/22945/)

70 Actualitati.md. Source: Была ли в действительности "советская оккупация" Молдовы, мифы о которой сочиняют унионисты? Source: <http://actualitati.md/ru/analitika/byla-li-v-deystvitelnosti-sovetskaya-okkupaciya-moldovy-mify-o-kotoroy-sochinyayut>

71 Actualitati.md. Source: <http://actualitati.md/ru/analitika/byla-li-v-deystvitelnosti-sovetskaya-okkupaciya-moldovy-mify-o-kotoroy-sochinyayut>

far, the Moldovan population has resisted federalization. Almost 70% of voters were opposed to a federal arrangement in 2003, although, by 2016, that number had decreased by almost half.<sup>72</sup>

The Russian narrative in favour of a federalized Moldova is based on an argument regarding the multiple ethnicities present in the Moldovan population. This is in stark contrast to the centralization paradigm of the Kremlin's federal arrangements in the Russian Federation.

Russians are the third largest ethnic group in Moldova, comprising less than 5,4% of the population, while Ukrainians are the largest ethnic minority at 7,6% according to the 2004 national census. But years of language oppression and sovietisation policies have imposed a high toll on self-identification of the multiple ethnic groups and cultural attributes. The argument is that ethnic groups are distinct peoples, and 'peoples' [equated with 'nations'] shall enjoy the right to self-determination. Especially if Moldovan elites were to seek reunification with Romania, this would harm other 'loyal' peoples, such as Russians, Ukrainians, Gagauzians, or Bulgarians. Retaining use of the Cyrillic script for writing Moldovan/Romanian in Transnistria works to differentiate the area from the rest of Moldova using Latin letters.

The Kremlin's policy of creating divisions was particularly evident in 1990/1991.

<sup>72</sup> IPP Social Opinion Barometer, 2003, IPP Social Opinion Barometer, 2016, Source: [www.ipp.md](http://www.ipp.md)



Russian narratives emphasized the 'nationalism of elites' in Moldova, and the 'internationalism' of the Transnistrian population, in order to legitimize the creation of the separatist Transnistrian statelet.<sup>73</sup> The TASS News Agency claims that the war in 1990 broke out in response to the calls in Chisinau to unify with Romania, and that only because of the heroic intervention of the Soviet troops, bloodshed was avoided in Gagauzia. And, later on, that the war in Transnistria was stopped thanks to the Russian Peacekeeping Operation.<sup>74</sup>

In 1999, at the OSCE Summit Declaration, Russia committed to withdraw its troops from Moldova. However, with the emergence of Vladimir Putin, old commitments

<sup>73</sup> The unrecognized Republic of Transdnistria came into existence in 1990, following a war of secession with Moldova. It has a population of over 500 000, most of them ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers. Russia currently maintains a peacekeeping force of about 1 000 soldiers stationed in the Transnistrian capital, Tiraspol, to ensure security and stability in the region.

<sup>74</sup> ZDG, StopFake, No.16 (565), April 28, 2016, p. 14. Source: [www.zdg.md](http://www.zdg.md)

were ignored. In 2003, a new federalized plan known as the Kozak Memorandum triggered a large political crisis.<sup>75</sup> The memorandum was finally rejected by the Chisinau authorities, causing an outburst in the Kremlin. Regional elites in Gagauzia and Transnistria continue to demand a radical reformation of the Moldovan state, with regional veto-power actors. Accepting it would have diverted Moldova from its path toward integration with the European Union. In Russia, the 2003 Kozak Memorandum continues to be cited as the only feasible way of achieving the reintegration of the breakaway region.

In 2012, Vice Prime Minister D. Rogozin was appointed Personal Representative of the Russian President for Transnistria, as well as Co-Chair of the Russia-Moldova Inter-governmental Economic Cooperation Commission. Rogozin's dual appointment treats Moldova and the separatist region of Transnistria as two separate entities. The Russian Federation has also been considering opening a Consulate General and an office for the Special Representative of the Russian President for Transnistria in Tiraspol.<sup>76</sup> After Chisinau rejected these initiatives, the Kremlin's reaction was clear: for them the objections raised by Moldova against

its proposed Consulate are absurd, infringing upon [Russia's] obligation to serve its almost 180 000 Russian citizens in Transnistria.<sup>77</sup>

Soon after his nomination, Rogozin talked tough with his Moldovan counterparts on various issues including the accumulated debts of the separatist regime. Russia maintains that the accumulated debts of Transnistria [almost 6 billion USD] are the responsibility of the Republic of Moldova, and that if Moldova wants to unify the state through a federal project, then Moldova should pay the debts and then recognise Transnistria.

The idea of Transnistria as a fortress under siege has been widely employed in the last decades; the region is described as a military outpost or 'Russia's outpost in the Balkans'.<sup>78</sup>

The region of Gagauzia often links itself with the Transnistrian region, effectively supporting arguments from the Kremlin. In March 2012, the legislative body of the region, the People's Assembly of Gagauzia (PAG) signed a collaboration agreement with the Supreme Council, its counterpart in the Transnistrian region. Previously, the PAG had concluded such agreements with the Parliament of South Ossetia and with the People's Assembly of Abkhazia<sup>79</sup>—

75 I. Botan, E-Democracy, Kozak Plan implications, 30 November, 2003, Source: <http://www.e-democracy.md/en/monitoring/politics/comments/200312031/>

76 Rogozin Institutionalizing Direct Relations with Transnistria, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 9 Issue: 79. Source: [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=39292&no\\_cache=1#Vz9Z074w3IU](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=39292&no_cache=1#Vz9Z074w3IU)

77 Grigori Karasin, February 15, 2014. Source: <http://infoprut.ro/27282-deschiderea-unui-consulat-la-tiraspol-ramane-o-prioritate-a-rusiei.html>

78 Александр Сергеев: Приднестровье сегодня: важнейший форпост России нуждается в защите, March 8, 2014, REGNUM, Source: <http://regnum.ru/news/polit/1775976.html>

79 Source: <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=3363>

two separatist regions in Georgia. The PAG also requested that the President and Parliament of Moldova acknowledge the independence of the Georgian separatist regions.<sup>80</sup> In 2014, Gagauzia held a referendum, which was declared illegal by several Moldovan Courts,<sup>81</sup> and, as part of the campaign, a TV show claimed '*Gagauz doesn't want to leave under a Romanian flag, suffering gendarmes [historical Romanian police units]*'.<sup>82</sup> The influence of the Russian mass media in aggravating ethnic Gagauzians has been substantial, which may explain the high turnout for the illegal referendum [98,09%]. In February 2014, the Moldovan

National Broadcasting Council suspended *Rossia24*, which was found to be 'lacking professional attitude and pluralism' in its reporting on the Gagauz referendum.<sup>83</sup> In March 2015 Irina Vlah elected leader by the Gagauz Autonomy with support from the Kremlin and the Party of Socialists of Moldova; she also received congratulations from the speaker of the Supreme Council.<sup>84</sup> The visibility and credibility of Vlah were improved by visits from Russian Duma MPs, strong media coverage by the Russian media, and by visiting Russian artists.

Top-level regional officials criticized Moldova's Association Agreement with the EU, saying that '*no one in EU is interested in buying cheap products from Moldova, which means our agriculture will be destroyed, while Gagauz will be lost; suspending the Association Agreement is a matter of survival*'.<sup>85</sup> Russian Deputy PM Rogozin accused the EU and Moldova of '*violating the basic rights of the Russian people in Transnistria by signing a trade deal that does not take Russian interests into account*'. He pledged his personal support to maintain the same level of financial assistance to the separatist regime, backed by loyal Russian compatriots.<sup>86</sup>

80 Source: <http://www.ziare.com/international/abhazia/independenta-abhaziei-si-osetiei-de-sud-recunoscute-de-autonomia-gagauza-418620>

81 On 2 February 2014, Gagauzian authorities called the local population to vote in a referendum on two issues: integration into either the EU or the Moscow-led Customs Union and the draft law 'On the deferred status of the Autonomous Region of Gagauzia', considered illegal by constitutional authorities. Under the proposed legislation, if Moldova were to lose its sovereignty, e.g. through the unification of Moldova and Romania, or, as some politicians have argued, through Moldova's further integration with the EU, the autonomous region would automatically become the independent Republic of Gagauzia. As expected, the outcome of the vote showed overwhelming support for both the Customs Union and the draft law. According to the figures released by Gagauzia's Central Electoral Commission, 98.5% of the voters supported Moldova's integration into the Customs Union, while 98% voted in favour of the 'deferred independence' bill. Support for closer integration with the EU was marginal, reaching just over 2%. Source: <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2014-03-10/gagauzia-growing-separatism-moldova>

82 Rossbalt, Гагаузия намерена создать свою армию и выйти из состава Молдавии. Source: <http://www.rosbalt.ru/exussr/2014/03/18/1245620.html>

83 RFERL, July 5, 2014. Source: <http://www.rferl.org/content/moldova-tv-bans-rossiya-broadcasters/25446461.html>

84 Source: <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=17300>

85 Молдавские гагаузы не хотят терять «второй дом», Россию, 18/04/2014. Source: <http://inosmi.ru/moldova/20140818/222429448.html>

86 Russia Today, Russian Deputy PM pledges support to Moldova's breakaway region Source: <https://www.rt.com/politics/169928-rogozin-moldova-transdnier-russia/>



Russia excluded Gagauz winemakers from the embargoed list of Moldovan producers, thus creating incentives to blame the Moldovan authorities for being solely responsible for signing the Association Agreement with the EU.<sup>87</sup> The Speaker of the Gagauz People's Assembly, D. Konstantinov, announced that a General Consulate will be established in the region, that Russia will provide a 35-50% tax rebate on gas consumption for the population of the autonomy, Gagauzians working in Russia will be able to apply for Russian passports, and Rosspotrebnadzor, the Russian Federal Service for the Supervision of Consumer Rights Protection and Human Well-Being, will open a sanitary-epidemiological lab in Comrat. In addition, Gagauzia will establish its own political representation in Moscow.<sup>88</sup>

In Odessa, Ukraine on 27 October 2014 pro-Kremlin militants rallied to proclaim the creation of a new separatist state, the Bessarabian Republic of Budjak, with the participation of several districts of Ukraine, and also with Gagauzia.<sup>89</sup> Meanwhile, pro-Kremlin groups rallied in two Gagauz cities in support of Donbass secession and Russia's

annexation of Crimea.<sup>90</sup> The narrative of a new of nations in the region of Budjak [Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Moldovans, Jew, Gagauz, Roma] deciding to establish their own state outside of Ukraine was copying the earlier Russian narrative on Transnistria<sup>91</sup> in Donbas.

### NARRATIVE #3: THE EUROPEAN UNION IS BAD, RUSSIA'S CUSTOMS UNION IS WHAT YOU NEED!

NATO was seen as Russia's main opponent in the near abroad after 1991-2000, but after 2009, as the idea of bringing the six most willing Eastern Partnership States closer to the EU evolved, the Russian media shifted its focus to the European Union. Russian diplomats proposed a possible joint-membership in both the Euro-Asian Union (EAU) and the European Union (EU) for countries of the former Soviet Union, even while the EAU was still only a concept on paper.<sup>92</sup>

The Russian policy line has been that Moldova's orientation should not be directed toward the EU, and the argument enjoys significant support in the region.

87 Aljazeera. Source: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/07/kremlins-alcohol-diplomacy-divides-moldova-150701105943120.html>

88 KM.RU. 28.03.2014. Source: <http://www.km.ru/economics/2014/03/28/ekonomika-i-finansy/735965-rossiya-reshila-otkryt-konsulstvo-v-gagauzskoi-avton>

89 Gagauzinfo. В Одесской области провозгласили «Буджакскую народную республику» с участием Гараузии. Source: <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=21304>

90 RusskaiaVesna. Гараузия — тюркская крепость Русского мира, 31.05.2014 - 11:44. Source: [http://rusvesna.su/recent\\_opinions/1401522241](http://rusvesna.su/recent_opinions/1401522241)

91 The State Duma adopted a law calling the promotion of separatist ideas in Russia a criminal violation; those found guilty of sharing their ideas of separation in the media may be jailed for up to 5 years.

92 Chaillot Papers, Nicu Popescu, The Eurasian Union: the real, the imaginary and the likely, September 2014. Source: [http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/CP\\_132.pdf](http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/CP_132.pdf)

“The Russian anti-EU narrative intensified during 2015/2016.”

Socialist party leader and president-elect Igor Dodon, together with various MPs, made a promise to cancel the EU Association Agreement, but not to touch the visa-free regime, so as to maximally open the Russian market to exports, and strengthen Moldova's strategic partnership with Russia.<sup>93</sup> and <sup>94</sup> Russian Deputy PM Rogozin warned that *'Moldova will lose Transnistria, if it continues moving toward the EU'*, and metaphorically, *'Moldova's train en route to Europe will lose its wagons in Transnistria'*.<sup>95</sup> He added that, *'Energy is important, the cold season is near, winter on its way. We hope that you will not*

*freeze this winter'*,<sup>96</sup> alluding to the unsettled situation with the Gazprom-Moldovagaz supply contract. Rogozin has claimed that the Moldovan government never asked for Tiraspol's point of view during its political discussions with the EU concerning the Association Agreement. In reality, Moldovan negotiators included one representative from Transnistria in every meeting forum, but it was the Transnistrians who chose to minimize their involvement.<sup>97</sup>

The Russian anti-EU narrative intensified during 2015/2016, capitalizing on the failures of the Moldovan government and the banking fraud scandal involving Vlad Filat, but also on the strained atmosphere in Europe, where the refugee crisis and economic decline were constantly in the headlines. For instance, Sergey Narishkin, Speaker of the Russian Duma, stated that *'Ukraine and Moldova have lost the Eurasian market, getting nothing instead'*. He also added that although the EAU is smaller than the EU or the USA, it is still accessible, secure, and open to equal benefits for market participants'.<sup>98</sup> Some pro-Moscow authors were triumphant, claiming that the EU is finished and is now

93 Экономическое обозрение. И.Додон. Молдавские власти получили американскую лицензию на разгон протестов, 19.02.2016, но.6

94 Panorama. Source: <http://www.pan.md/replika/Igori-Dodon-Dogovor-ob-assotsiatsii-s-ES-budet-otmenen>

95 World Affairs, A.Motyl, Ukraine's Orange Blues. Source: <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/blog/alexander-j-motyl/russia%E2%80%99s-revisionist-claims-ukraine-and-moldova>

96 V. Socor, The Jamestown Foundation. Rogozin Threatens Moldova with Sanctions over Association Agreement with the European Union, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 10 Issue: 155, September 4, 2013

97 The Jamestown Foundation, Rogozin Threatens Moldova with Sanctions over Association Agreement with the European Union. Source: Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 10 Issue: 155

98 Nash Vybor. Source: <http://vybor.md/naryishkin-ukraina-i-moldova-vyibrav-evrosoyuz-nichego-vzamen-ne-priobreli/>



getting what the Soviet Union got in the 1990s.<sup>99</sup> *Russkii Mir* ideologues are well aware of the political and strategic stakes, and hope that Eurasian integration ‘could destroy the global dominance of the West and put an end to US hegemony’.<sup>100</sup>

The Russian narrative on economics is fused with conservatism. One of Sputnik’s Directors, I. Rosca, formerly a leader of the opposition Popular Christian Democrat Party (PPCD), called liberal ideas ‘a virus’.<sup>101</sup> Several organizations are involved in the economic anti-EU narrative. Presenting itself as a classical Marxist political group, the Red Block pickets EU embassies and Parliament, and blames the difficult economic conditions on the EU, not

Russia, even if it is the latter imposing an embargo on food items.<sup>102</sup> Farmers from the North of Moldova have joined the protests and the political parties have also gotten involved. Some of the most vocal activists created a political party in 2014, the ‘Popular Movement for the Customs Union’, which transformed itself into the Russian-Slavic Party of Moldova in February 2016.<sup>103</sup>

When the EU lifted its financial support to Moldova as a result of the banking scandal in 2015, Moldova tried to free its hands by negotiating ‘a return to the Russian markets’. Recently, the Minister of Economy, O. Calmîk, stated that he expects Russia to reconsider its embargo on 19 types of exports at the Moscow economic forum ‘25 years together in the CIS’ to re-launch bilateral economic relations, bringing new Russian investments into the Moldovan energy sector.<sup>104</sup> However, the Director of the Institute of Current Economy, Nikita Issaev, has openly stated that the only stone on the road between Moldova and Russia is the Association Agreement with EU, and that ‘it is practically impossible to reconcile two different trade zones, so Moldova will have to decide with whom she will stand, the CIS or the EU’.<sup>105</sup>

99 Молдавские Ведомости, Валерий Остап. Евросоюз закончился, No.21, 25.03.2016.

100 Elena Ponomareva and Lubov Shishilina, ‘Krah Operatsii Vostochnoe Partnerstvo’, 18 June 2014. Source: [http://zerkalokryma.ru/specialproject/novorossiya/predsedatelstvo\\_latvii\\_v\\_es2015\\_vostochnoe\\_partnerstvo\\_vmesto\\_ili\\_vmeste\\_s\\_rossiej/](http://zerkalokryma.ru/specialproject/novorossiya/predsedatelstvo_latvii_v_es2015_vostochnoe_partnerstvo_vmesto_ili_vmeste_s_rossiej/)

101 Iurie Rosca. European integration as a state ideology and social malady. Source: <http://iurierosca.md/opinii/european-integration-as-state-ideology-and-social-malady.html/>

102 Grenada, Социальный форум Молдовы передал свое обращение ряду левых партий страны. Source: [http://www.grenada.md/post/socforum\\_prizyv\\_levym\\_partiam](http://www.grenada.md/post/socforum_prizyv_levym_partiam)

103 Source: [http://vybor.md/stala-yasna-tsel-peredvizheniya-nato-vskoy-tehniki-v-negreshtyi/?\\_utl\\_t=fb](http://vybor.md/stala-yasna-tsel-peredvizheniya-nato-vskoy-tehniki-v-negreshtyi/?_utl_t=fb)

104 Source: [http://vybor.md/stala-yasna-tsel-peredvizheniya-nato-vskoy-tehniki-v-negreshtyi/?\\_utl\\_t=fb](http://vybor.md/stala-yasna-tsel-peredvizheniya-nato-vskoy-tehniki-v-negreshtyi/?_utl_t=fb)

105 Экономическое обозрение, Стабильная нестабильность в молдавско-российских отношениях, 25 марта 2016, no.11.



## NARRATIVE #4 ROMANIA AND NATO ARE A THREAT TO PEACE

Russian and pro-Kremlin media promote opinions in which geopolitical relationships are described as a contest for territory. One of Sputnik's Directors, I. Rosca, stated that a similar crisis to the one that erupted in Ukraine could easily break out in Moldova, since the Western obsession with expanding its frontiers to the East is based on geopolitical ambitions. If Russia provides some support for the 'rebel groups', it is only because the USA is openly financing the militarization of the Ukrainian Army'.<sup>106</sup> The author concluded that *'Moldova is ready for war, blockading the Russian peace-keepers, promoting Russophobia and the image of Russia as the enemy, which are the bricks to an imminent escalation of actions that could provoke a new war with Transnistria'*.

There is support for distancing Transnistria and Gagauzia from Chisinau, while Romanian and Western relations with Moldova are contested. Russia and its supporters also exploit this theme to instil fear of military conflict. As a result, there has been call for neutrality, e.g. Iurie Iakubov, who financed the referendum in 2014 in Gagauzia, promotes the idea that *'Moldova shall not rush for the West, nor for the East,*

*but stand alone in the Center'*.<sup>107</sup> Igor Dodon, president-elect and leader of the Party of Socialists (PSRM), stated that, *'inviting NATO troops to celebrate Victory Day [May 9<sup>th</sup>] in the central square of Chisinau is a rough slap in the face'*, and an *'insult to the Constitution following Parliament's Declaration of Permanent Sovereignty and Neutrality'*.<sup>108</sup>

Reporting on the war in Ukraine has also been used as a tool in domestic politics. The Party of Socialists declared that banning journalists D. Kiseliov and A. Kondrashov from TV news channel *Rossia-1* confirms the 'authoritarian character of the current regime',<sup>109</sup> in the situation where Moldovan authorities banned *Rossia-24*, and fined *Prime*, *TV7*, *REN-TV*, and *RTR-Rossia* for their independent news. In fact, the reason for the ban was anti-Ukrainian propaganda conducted by Russian war correspondents from separatist battlefields in Donbass.

107 Юрий Якубов: Молдова не должна рваться ни на Запад, ни на Восток, а оставаться по центру, Gagauzinfo. Source: <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=23485>

108 Bloknot. Source: <http://bloknot-moldova.md/news/dodon-ne-dopustim-chtoby-na-moldavskoy-zemle-gospo-738582>

109 In fact, the SIS banned several Russian TV groups and propagandists from entering Moldova. In May 2014, Johan Beckman, leader of the Antifa Committee of Finland, was banned from entering Chisinau Airport. Also, Vice PM Rogozin's plane was checked by SIS operatives, which resulted in the confiscation of all boxes with signatures collected in Transnistria to join Russia. In October 2014, RISI Senior Researcher V. Kashirin was banned when he publicly called on the Gagauz population to rebel against Moldovan authorities. Source: <http://actualitati.md/ru/vnutrennyaya-politika/batrynya-v-respublike-moldova-realizuyutsya-dvoynye-standarty-v-oblasti>

106 Эксперт новостей, М. Лупашко, Война стучит в нашу дверь, Но.7, 11.03.2016

The Russian media constantly raises the issue of the unification of Moldova and Romania. Igor Dodon has also alleged in *Zvezda* that ‘any attempt to unify the two states could erupt into a new hotspot in our region’, and that ‘the military conflict of 1992 can be repeated’.<sup>110</sup> The Kremlin claims that Romania is not capable of acting alone on the unification project ‘Unirea 2018’,<sup>111</sup> therefore, any activity in this area can be seen as resulting from the USA’s project for the region.

Pro-Kremlin media outlets are firm in their accusations of NATO and the West harbouring violent intentions in Moldova. Examples are easily found: ‘American instructors teach Moldovan soldiers to kill’, as subtitle under the news headline ‘NATO – Yes, Rossiya – Nyet’.<sup>112</sup> Reporting on anti-corruption protests, one journalist predicted ‘*there are signs that if chaos prevails, then the Romanian Army is ready to invade Moldova and install a Romanian administration, as it was in the past*’.<sup>113</sup>

In 2013, the radical political groups Antifa and Krasnyi released a series of harshly critical statements concerning Moldova’s pro-EU orientation, stating that ‘*the Moldovan Government is promoting a militaristic*

*policy, breaking the Constitution [neutrality], and playing into NATO’s playground*’.<sup>114</sup> According to their statement ‘*the region is becoming a hotbed of instability only because of the Western militaristic views, and the Pentagon’s risky initiatives could easily ignite a fire in Moldova, a new civil war in our country*’.

In summary, the four hostile narratives described here are widely circulated in Moldova. As the examples show, recent years have seen a tremendous number of activities promoting Kremlin ideas. It is very difficult to examine how much Moldova’s agenda has changed due to pro-Kremlin messaging. The measurement of its success should be done on a more general level. Nonetheless, it is safe to argue that Western values are not rated highly if the European Union has lost so much of its appeal, while Russian President Vladimir Putin enjoys great popularity.

110 Panorama. Source: <http://pan.md/poslednie-novosti/dodon-unirea---eto-grajdanskaya-voyna>

111 Panorama. Source: <http://pan.md/mneniya/chubashenko-proekt-unirea-2018-made-in-usa>

112 Moskovskii Komsomoletz, Moldova. World Weekly, 10-16 March 2016, p.3

113 B1 Tv. Source: <http://www.b1.ro/stiri/externe/propaganda-rusa-in-functiune-in-moldova-va-intra-armata-romana-va-fi-sfarsitul-independentei-moldovei-pentru-totdeauna-video-138525.html>

114 Grenada. Декларация I-го Съезда политической партии «Красный Блок» (Наш дом Молдова) Source: [http://www.grenada.md/post/net\\_voine\\_net\\_nato\\_militarizmu](http://www.grenada.md/post/net_voine_net_nato_militarizmu)

# WHO CONTROLS THE MEDIA AND PEOPLE'S MEDIA CONSUMPTION?

ICJ—Nadine Gogu

## ABSTRACT

This chapter describes who or what controls the media and media consumption. The analysis emphasizes the importance of the power to control what Moldovans read, see, hear, and experience. Russian media is seen as more trustworthy than Moldovan media.<sup>115</sup> The fact that much of the media is linked to the local political and business elite, most often to Vladimir Plahotniuc, but also to Chiril Luchinschi, Vlad Filat, Vadim Ciubara, Victor Țopa, Dan Lozovan, Dumitru Țîra, and Ilan Shor among others, does not help the situation. Television is still seen as relatively reliable, as it is the third most trusted source of socio-political information.<sup>116</sup>

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115 Barometer of Public Opinion. Institute for Public Policies, April 2016. Source: [http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/BOP\\_04.2016\\_prima\\_parte\\_finale-r.pdf](http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/BOP_04.2016_prima_parte_finale-r.pdf) (last accessed 20 May, 2016)

116 Measuring perceptions of socio-political news by the media audience in the Republic of Moldova. Independent Journalism Centre, November 2015. Source: <http://media-azi.md/sites/default/files/Studiu-calitativ%202015-eng.pdf> (last accessed 6 April, 2016)

## INTRODUCTION

Given the role of the mass media in shaping the perceptions that the average person holds about the political world, it is particularly important during elections and in times of war and political crises. While the public relies on the news media as a source of information about politics, politicians also depend on the press, both during elections and when governing. This explains why politicians do their best to control what issues journalists cover, and to frame their reports so as to show themselves in the best light. Consequently, politicians have developed skills and strategies to increase their power over the media, and to interact with and control the press.

Studies and surveys conducted in recent decades have shown how the media can shape public opinion and change people's perceptions about foreign and domestic issues. While the average citizen doesn't know much about politics, what he or she does know comes via mass media.

Therefore, how the media operates and what they report greatly influence what people know and think about politics.<sup>117</sup>

## THE MOLDOVAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE AND MEDIA CONSUMPTION

Despite its status as the poorest nation in Europe, Moldova is media rich. The market is over-saturated, which makes media independence challenging and vulnerable to pressure. Broadcast and print media are pluralistic in terms of numbers, but not so pluralistic in terms of providing balanced coverage of politics, economics, finance, as well as the arts, sports, and lifestyle features for the diverse Moldovan audience. A multitude of media outlets operate in the information market, some of them representing political parties, others claiming to be independent, but actually associated with certain political parties and movements, while a few are truly independent. The media are currently more pervasive due to the expanded availability and use of new technologies. Television and the Internet, which is still spreading throughout the country, are the primary sources of information for most Moldovan media consumers at 79% and 50%, respectively.<sup>118</sup>

Radio and print media do not have such a wide following at 38% and 9%, respectively, however their online versions do.

There are 126 national and regional broadcasters in Moldova, including 70 television stations of which five have national coverage—the public broadcasters *Moldova 1*, *Prime TV*, *Canal 2*, *Canal 3*, and *Publika*,<sup>119</sup> and 56 radio stations including eight with national coverage—*Radio Moldova*, *Muz FM*, *Publika FM*, *Radio Plai*, *Hit FM*, *Vocea Basarabiei*, *Fresh FM*, and *Radio Noroc*. Moldovan citizens are the largest consumers of Internet among the Eastern Partnership countries: they are leaders in the use of social networks [53%], Internet [Skype, YouTube, emails at 55%], radio [62%] and online television [35%].<sup>120</sup> In the beginning of 2014, approximately 24 000 websites were registered in Moldova with the *.md* domain, and nearly 200 of them published media content. These numbers have continued to grow since then.<sup>121</sup> There are no recent data on the share of print media in the market, but according to data published in 2008, 253 newspapers and magazines and 16 news agencies were operating in Moldova, including

117 The Media and Democracy: Theory and History. Source: <https://online.missouri.edu/exec/data/courses/2339/public/lesson01/lesson01.aspx> (last accessed May 29, 2016)

118 Barometer of Public Opinion. Institute of Public Policies, April 2016. Source: [http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/BOP\\_04.2016\\_prima\\_parte\\_finale-r.pdf](http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/BOP_04.2016_prima_parte_finale-r.pdf) (last accessed 20 May 2016)

119 Broadcasting Coordinating Council's web page. Source: <http://www.cca.md/news/lista-radiodifuzorilor-c-u-acoperire-na-ional> (last accessed 6 April, 2016)

120 Report on the state of media in Eastern Partnership Countries, November 2016. Source: [http://media-azi.md/sites/default/files/Report%20on%20state%20of%20media%20in%20EaP%20countries%202015\\_0.pdf](http://media-azi.md/sites/default/files/Report%20on%20state%20of%20media%20in%20EaP%20countries%202015_0.pdf) (last accessed 12 May 2016)

121 Ibid.

those in the Transnistrian region.<sup>122</sup> In recent years, several newspapers and news agencies have gone out of business and some newspapers have given up their print versions in favour of posting online.

It is worth mentioning that public trust in the media in general is still high, even though lately it has started to decline. Currently, the media rank third on the list of the most trusted institutions following the church and local administrations. Television is the most trusted source of socio-political information for 59% of the population while the Internet/websites are considered the most trusted sources by 26%, radio by 4%, and newspapers by only 2%.<sup>123</sup> Most media consumers either consider themselves to be very informed or are quite satisfied with the level of information they possess.<sup>124</sup> However, if the quality of that information is actually low, this would imply that large sections of the public have the habit of trusting most everything the media offers. As a result, actors such as politicians and business people are interested in controlling broadcast and online media in order to influence large segments of the population.

## MEDIA OWNERS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON MEDIA CONTENT IN MOLDOVA

The media are vulnerable to manipulation by both political authorities and economic forces. In democratic states where the authorities do not have direct control over news outlets, they may still be able to indirectly control news content by providing various inducements to encourage journalists or owners to bias their coverage.<sup>125</sup> In less democratic states, the government uses the media to mobilize citizens to take actions that may not be in their individual best interests.<sup>126</sup> Consequently, in many countries the independent media, whose role resides in contributing to democracy and economic progress, fail to take root or survive.<sup>127</sup> Media researchers have suggested employing the concept of 'media capture' to describe a systemic governance problem where political leaders and media owners work together in a symbiotic,

122 Mass Media Guide. Independent Journalism Centre. Chisinau, 2008.

123 Measuring perceptions of socio-political news by the media audience in the Republic of Moldova. Independent Journalism Centre, November 2015. Source: <http://media-azi.md/sites/default/files/Studiu-calitativ%202015-eng.pdf> (last accessed 6 April, 2016)

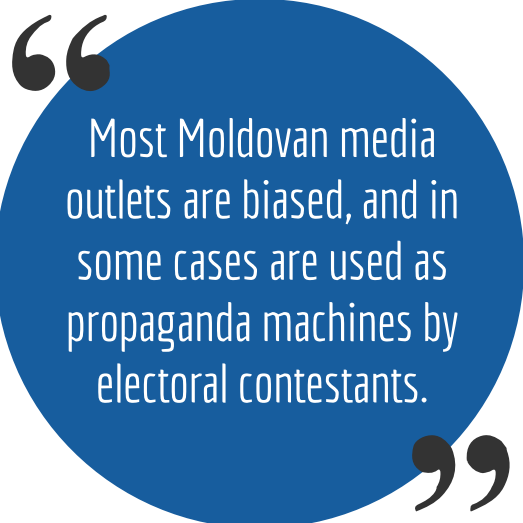
124 Ibid.

125 Noeline Gannaway Mind Control and the Media. Pacific Institute of Resource Management. Source: [http://www.converge.org.nz/pirm/mind\\_con.htm](http://www.converge.org.nz/pirm/mind_con.htm) (last accessed 10 April 2016)

126 Scott Gehlbach and Konstantin Sonin. Government Control of the Media, September 2008 Source: <http://www.wallis.rochester.edu/wallisseminarseries/GehlbachSoninRochester2.pdf> (last accessed 10 April 2016)

127 Captured News Media: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro. Center for International Media Assistance, June 2016. Source: <http://www.cima.ned.org/publication/captured-news-media-bosnia-herzegovina-serbia-montenegro/> (last accessed 8 June 2016)





but mutually corrupting relationship: media owners provide news coverage supportive of political leaders in exchange for favourable government treatment of their businesses and political interests.<sup>128</sup>

The interference of politicians is of particular concern, especially during election campaigns. As media monitoring reports have shown, most Moldovan media outlets are biased, and in some cases are used as propaganda machines by electoral contestants. Thus, during the 2014 parliamentary elections about 66% of the media outlets monitored either favoured or maligned certain candidates and failed to inform voters in a correct and balanced way.<sup>129</sup> The same was true during the local general elections in 2015.

128 Ibid.

129 Media monitoring during the parliamentary election campaign in 2014. Independent Journalism Centre, Chisinau, 2014. Source: <http://media-azi.md/ro/publicatii/raport-final-monitorizarea-mass-media-%C3%AEn-campania-electoral%C4%83-pentru-alegerile> (last accessed 5 May 2016)

Even though the Broadcasting Code prohibits political parties from owning radio or TV stations, party members are allowed to hold licenses.<sup>130</sup> Consequently, political leaders may own broadcast media and use them to promote their party's programs and ideology.

Ownership statements published in November 2015 on the Broadcasting Coordinating Council (BCC) web page<sup>131</sup> revealed that, in terms of the territorial coverage and audience figures, the most influential TV stations belong to politicians and business people linked to politics.

The Democratic Party, which is the leading party in the governing coalition, has the greatest control on media, mainly due to Vladimir Plahotniuc, a local oligarch and politician seen by many as the most powerful and influential man in the country.<sup>132</sup> He owns four TV stations with countrywide coverage, as well as three radio stations<sup>133</sup> that represent about 60% of Moldova's TV market.<sup>134</sup>

130 Source: [http://lex.justice.md/document\\_rom.php?id=041D82D8:3A07C731](http://lex.justice.md/document_rom.php?id=041D82D8:3A07C731) (last accessed June 3, 2016)

131 Broadcasting Coordinating Council. Source: [www.cca.md](http://www.cca.md)

132 Maria Levenco. Vlad Plahotniuc: Moldova's man in the shadows, February 2016, Source: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/maria-levenco/vlad-plahotniuc-moldova-s-man-in-shadows> (last accessed 6 April, 2016)

133 Prime TV, Canal 2, Canal 3, Publika TV, Publika FM, MuzFM and Maestro FM.

134 Proprietarii televiziunilor din Moldova: Miliardari americani, afaceristi locali, banci din Rusia si milionari de la Tiraspol. Moldstreet. md, November 2015. Source: <http://www.moldstreet.com/?go=news&n=4266>

Some media<sup>135</sup> recently wrote that Mr Plahotniuc has also purchased *CTC Mega* and *Super TV*, but his name is not included on ownership documents or on the list of final beneficiaries of the two stations. It should also be noted that the Democratic Party is affiliated with a number of web portals and Vladimir Plahotniuc is also the owner of the ad agencies *Casa Media* and *Casa Media Plus* that control over 60% of the advertising market in Moldova.<sup>136</sup>

An analysis by the *Eurasia Daily Monitor*<sup>137</sup> shows that Mr Plahotniuc's power instruments include: 1) control of law enforcement bodies—mainly the Anti-Corruption Centre, the Prosecutor General's Office, the National Commission for Integrity, a governmental telecommunications and data centre, as well as parts of the court system and the Ministry of Justice; 2) economic and financial levers—the Democratic Party controls the Ministry of the Economy and most of the regulatory and market-oversight agencies; 3) local administrations—the Democratic Party won many seats in elections for local councils that were held country-wide in June 2015; and 4) the media conglomerate



General Media Group, including *Prime TV*, *Canal 2*, *Canal 3*, and *Publika TV*. These four television stations with nation-wide coverage are among the top ten most-viewed stations in terms of news consumption: 53% of respondents interviewed within a national survey mentioned *Prime TV* as their primary source of socio-political news. *Publika*, *Canal 2*, and *Canal 3* had also high figures—42%, 20%, and 18% respectively.<sup>138</sup>

Mr Plahotniuc's dual role is interesting—he plays a leading role in one of the pro-Western government parties, while his TV channels broadcast Kremlin-controlled programming. It should be noted that, in addition to local programming, which is shown mostly in the mornings and evenings, *Prime TV* rebroadcasts *Pervii Kanal* programs from Russia, which are very popular in Moldova. The most popular Russian-produced content includes entertainment

135 Source: <http://mediapowermonitor.com/content/controversial-businessman-vlad-plahotniuc-buys-two-more-tv-stations-moldova> (last accessed 13 May, 2016)

136 More details on media ownership patterns can be found in the chapter 'Media ownerships and linkages to Moldovan politics'

137 Vladimir Socor, 'Plahotniuc's Power Base in Moldova: Allies and Instruments' (Part Two), *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, January 2016. Source: [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=44977&-cHash=0561b914e7d6299bb01d0daeb97d3fd7](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=44977&-cHash=0561b914e7d6299bb01d0daeb97d3fd7) (last accessed 10 June, 2016)

138 Measuring perceptions of socio-political news by the media audience in the Republic of Moldova, Independent Journalism Centre, November 2015. Source: <http://media-azi.md/sites/default/files/Studiu-calitativ%202015-eng.pdf> (last accessed 6 April, 2016)

“Pluralism is diminished, since consumers have access to the same sources, voices, and images.”

programs and talk shows.<sup>139</sup> Viewers are also exposed to *Pervii Kanal's* daily newscast *Vremea* and the weekly show *Voskresnoe Vremea*. It should be noted that the *Vremea* newscast is re-broadcasted immediately after *Primele Stiri* [First News], the local Moldovan newscast, at approximately 21.40 each evening. This explains the confusion of some media consumers regarding the ownership/provenience of newscasts. For instance, about 15% of those who watch *Prime TV* believe that *Vremea* newscast from Russia is either local, i.e. produced in Moldova, or a mixed newscast.<sup>140</sup>

*Canal 2* and *Canal 3* broadcast local content (newscasts, talk shows) as well as documentaries, movies, and television series purchased from Russia. Because of this mixture of local and foreign content, *Canal 3* media consumers are also confused regarding media content

139 Ibid.

140 Measuring perceptions of socio-political news by the media audience in the Republic of Moldova. Independent Journalism Centre, November 2015. Source: <http://media-azi.md/sites/default/files/Studiu-calitativ%202015-eng.pdf> (last accessed 6 April, 2016)

ownership—9% of them believe that the local *Novosti* newscast broadcast in Russian is produced in Russia or is a jointly produced program.<sup>141</sup>

The TV news station *Publika TV* broadcasts only local content—24 hours of newscasts, social and economic shows, and political talk shows. Most newscasts and talk shows closely cover the Democratic Party agenda and Vladimir Plahotniuc in particular, both as a politician and businessman, and founder of the charity foundation Edelweiss.<sup>142</sup>

As media experts have noticed,<sup>143</sup> in certain cases the same news report, produced by a single news crew, is broadcast on all four television stations owned by Mr Plahotniuc. In this way pluralism of opinion is diminished, since media consumers have access to the same sources, voices, and images. The main gatekeepers—editors, producers, and high-level management—are watching the topics covered and sources interviewed closely to make sure that only opinions in line with editorial policy (supporting the DP

141 Measuring perceptions of socio-political news by the media audience in the Republic of Moldova. Independent Journalism Centre, November 2015. Source: <http://media-azi.md/sites/default/files/Studiu-calitativ%202015-eng.pdf> (last accessed 6 April, 2016)

142 Media monitoring reports conducted by the Independent Journalism Centre. Source: <http://media-azi.md/ro/publicatii>

143 Panel discussions on fighting media concentration in Moldova. Independent Journalism Centre. April 2016. Source: <http://media-azi.md/ro/stiri/scenarii-optimiste-%C8%99i-realiste-privind-adoparea-noului-cod-al-audiovizualului> (last accessed 10 June 2016)



agenda) are represented.<sup>144</sup> As some journalists have seen, the editorial policy at *Publika TV* is influenced by 'high-level decision makers', while experts who criticize the Democratic Party are blacklisted, meaning they are not invited to appear on shows and are not quoted as sources.<sup>145</sup>

In the past, as a rule, the General Media Group did not so much favour Vladimir Plahotniuc personally, but rather opposed his opponents.<sup>146</sup> From 2011 to 2014 Mr Plahotniuc did not interfere much in the editorial policies of the media outlets he controls; however, starting with the election campaign in 2014 his influence has become obvious. The media monitoring reports during 2014 and 2015 produced enough data and evidence to support allegations that the TV stations owned by Plahotniuc were used as a tool to promote his interests and those of the Democratic Party. *Prime TV*, *Canal 2*, *Canal 3*, and *Publika TV* heavily promoted and decisively favoured the Democratic Party during the parliamentary elections in November 2014. For instance, *Prime TV* allotted around 31% of its broadcasts to cover Democratic Party candidates, who were exclusively presented as either positive or neutral. The same situation was observed at *Publika TV*, while the percentage was even higher at

*Canal 3* and *Canal 2*, at 39% and 43%, respectively.<sup>147</sup> *Prime TV* and *Publika TV* also consistently manipulated information when covering various political issues, including protests, in an attempt to distort the message and to discredit protesters by spreading rumours aimed at distracting attention from the essence of the problem and creating panic instead.<sup>148</sup> Also, thanks to its financial power, the *General Media Group* employs trolls in large numbers relative to the local media scene.<sup>149</sup>

Given the influence Mr Plahotniuc has on the government as one of the leaders of the Democratic Party currently in power, and the fact that the broadcast regulatory agency is politically controlled,<sup>150</sup> one may assume that he will not relinquish any of his stations to diminish media concentration. On the contrary, some voices say that Mr Plahotniuc will continue strengthening his media holdings and will not refrain from

144 Исследование NM: как поделен молдавский телерынок. Source: <http://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/issledovanie-nm-kak-podelen-moldavskiy-telerynok-22680> (last accessed 10 May 2016)

145 Ibid.

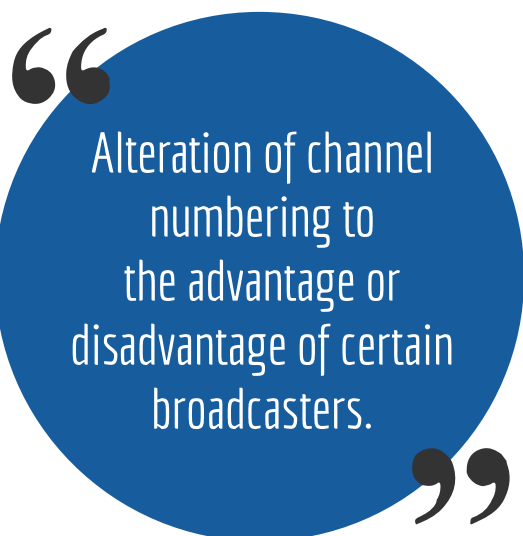
146 Vladimir Socor. Plahotniuc's Power Base in Moldova: Allies and Instruments (Part Two), Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 13 Issue: 7, January 2016.

147 Media monitoring report. Broadcasting Coordinating Council. December 2014, Source: [http://cca.md/files/PLURALISM%20TV%202014%2020.10%20-%2030.11.2014%20%28general%29\\_0\\_0.pdf](http://cca.md/files/PLURALISM%20TV%202014%2020.10%20-%2030.11.2014%20%28general%29_0_0.pdf) (last accessed 5 May, 2016)

148 Protest next to the home of democrat Vlad Plahotniuc: Manipulation and incompetence. Media Azi.md, July 2015. Source: <http://media-azi.md/en/node/316422> (last accessed 6 April, 2016)

149 Vladimir Socor. Plahotniuc's Power Base in Moldova: Allies and Instruments (Part Two), Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume, January 2016. Source: [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=44977&cHash=0561b914e7d6299bb-01d0daeb97d3fd7](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=44977&cHash=0561b914e7d6299bb-01d0daeb97d3fd7)

150 Press Freedom Report, Republic of Moldova 2015, Independent Journalism Centre. Source: <http://media-azi.md/en/press-freedom-report-republic-moldova-2015> (last accessed 16 April, 2016)



taking further steps to eliminate competitors in the information market.<sup>151</sup> Some media representatives have recently claimed that Mr Plahotniuc influenced cable operators to alter the channel numbering to the advantage or disadvantage of certain broadcasters.<sup>152</sup> For instance, the first 4 stations broadcast by national operator *Moldtelecom* were given to the private channels *Prime TV*, *Canal 2*, *Canal 3*, and *Publika TV*, while broadcasters that used to be listed in the first ten positions were moved down. Similar changes were noticed with other cable providers. *Moldtelecom* stated that the changes were made based on, ‘...the analysis of television channels’ popularity, their topics, convenience of use and subscribers’ requests’; however, the ‘popularity’ criterion is not convincing. For example, *TV7* was moved from position nine to position fifteen,

151 Participants at public debates on the Draft of the new Broadcasting Code, organized by the Parliamentary committee on media in December 2015 and January-February 2016.

152 Source: <http://www.tv7.md/ro/social/tv-7-a-fost-schimbata-in-grila-posturilor-tv-oferita-de-moldtelecom-acum-tv-7-poate-fi-gasita-la-numarul-15/> (last accessed 25 May, 2016)

while *NTV Moldova*, a channel that only received its broadcasting license in December 2015, appeared as number nine.<sup>153</sup> These changes were detrimental to channels that were moved down, since, according to some media representatives,<sup>154</sup> viewers used to watching certain channels in specific positions continued watching whatever channels were now placed in those positions.

Also, in several instances representatives of the opposition media accused Vladimir Plahotniuc of persuading cable operators to jam their broadcasts,<sup>155</sup> and accused the Broadcasting Coordinating Council of using a tenuous reason to exclude them from the mandatory list of channels that cable operators should retransmit in Moldova.<sup>156</sup>

It is worth mentioning that in 2015 the Democratic Party (PDM) parliamentarians developed a controversial draft law that included, among other issues, a provision regarding the mandatory percentage of Moldovan programming. A number

153 *Moldtelecom Has Changed the Order of TV Channels in the List of Services Based on Some ‘Internal Analyses’*. Media Azi.md, February 2016. Source: <http://www.media-azi.md/en/stiri/moldtelecom-has-changed-order-tv-channels-list-services-based-some-%E2%80%9Cinternal-analyses%E2%80%9D> (last accessed 25 May 2016)

154 Source: <http://www.tv7.md/ro/social/tv-7-a-fost-schimbata-in-grila-posturilor-tv-oferita-de-moldtelecom-acum-tv-7-poate-fi-gasita-la-numarul-15/> (last accessed 25 May 2016)

155 Source: <http://www.jurnaltv.md/ro/news/2016/1/21/jurnal-tv-bruiat-de-moldtelecom-10186181/>

156 Source: <http://www.media-azi.md/en/stiri/accent-tv-excluded-moldtelecom-cable-offer>, <http://ziarulnational.md/jurnal-tv-a-fost-exclus-din-lista-unor-operatori-de-cablu/>

of TV stations accused the PDM of trying to eliminate competitors from the media market; according to them it is very difficult to produce the required amount of local content.<sup>157</sup> The author of the draft law stated that the number of TV stations that operate in Moldova is too high, stressing that six or seven broadcasters would be more than enough.<sup>158</sup>

Another party linked to media influence is the Liberal Democratic Party (PLDM). Chiril Luchinschi, PLDM Member of Parliament and former head of the Parliamentary Committee on Media, owns two TV stations—*TV7 (Analytic Media-Group)* and *TNT Bravo*, as well as the *Alcasar Media Services SRL* sales house. Since its inception in 2006 and until 2015, *TV7* re-broadcast programming from the Russian station *NTV*, with local inserts, mostly consisting of newscasts and talk shows. In terms of news consumption, its rating was relatively high for a TV station with regional coverage, constituting 10%.<sup>159</sup> At the end of 2015, after the management's decision to replace the *NTV* newscasts and political talk shows with other programs, *TV7* was denied the right to rebroadcast *NTV* programming. Recently, Mr Luchinschi announced his intention to sell *TNT Bravo* as well as his shares (50%) in *Alcasar Media*

*Services SRL*, specifying that he would sell to any interested parties except media tycoons.<sup>160</sup> Consequently, *TV7* has encountered various problems. For instance, on 5 April 2016 the Moldovan company *TDB-service*, which provides satellite transmissions of TV signals to the majority of cable networks, ceased performing its contractual obligations to *TV7* without explanation. As a result, viewers in the majority of localities in the country had no access to *TV7* programs.<sup>161</sup> Also, many viewers reported they did not have access to *TV7* political talk shows because they were jammed. Also, on 25 May 2016 the popular talk show *Politika* went off the air. The host of the show said that it is very difficult for independent media in Moldova to compete under unfair conditions.<sup>162</sup> Also, *newmaker.md* recently reported severe staff cuts at *TV7*, because of financial problems encountered by the station. These are indicators that *TV7* is now seen as part of the opposition, and its owner does not have much political influence. It is worth mentioning that coverage on *TV7* was relatively balanced during the elections, although Liberal

157 Public debates on the draft law on changing the Broadcasting Code, organized by the Parliamentary committee on media, June 2015.

158 Ibid.

159 Measuring perceptions of socio-political news by the media audience in the Republic of Moldova. Independent Journalism Centre, November 2015. Source: <http://media-azi.md/sites/default/files/Studiu-calitativ%202015-eng.pdf> (last accessed 6 April 2016)

160 Исследование NM: как поделен молдавский телерынок. Newmaker.md, February 2016. Source: <http://newmaker.md/rus/novosti/issledovanie-nm-kak-podelen-moldavskiy-telerynok-22680> (last accessed 6 April 2016)

161 Source: <http://media-azi.md/en/stiri/declaration-media-ngos-discretionary-ceasing-tv7-transmissions-serious-violation-citizens%E2%80%99> (last accessed 20 May 2016)

162 Наталья Морарь объявила о закрытии ток-шоу Politika на TV7. May 2016. Source: <http://newmaker.md/rus/novosti/natalya-morar-objjavila-o-zakrytii-tok-shou-politica-na-tv7-25262> (last accessed 25 May, 2016)



Democratic candidates received more positive coverage in the newscasts than other candidates.<sup>163</sup> The TV shows *Politika* and *Interpol* were perceived as balanced since they used to present different perspectives and viewpoints on various issues.

The TV and radio stations of *Vocea Basarabiei* are owned by relatives of the former Prime Minister and former PLDM leader Vlad Filat, currently on trial for corruption and influence peddling. Valeriu Saharneanu, one of the stations' founders, stated that both stations were aggressively taken over by Mr Filat; he went to court to recover them.<sup>164</sup> It should be noted that *Vocea Basarabiei* TV reduced its coverage of events after Vlad Filat's arrest and currently does not provide news or talk shows,<sup>165</sup> while the

radio station was biased toward the Liberal Democratic Party during the last elections.<sup>166</sup> Among other media linked to the PLDM are the *Ziarul National* newspaper, the *National FM* radio station, and the web portal *unimedia.md* that backed the party during the 2014 and 2015 elections.<sup>167</sup>

The Party of Socialists, currently in opposition, has obvious connections with the final beneficiary of *Accent TV*, Vadim Ciubara, who is a consultant for the Party of Socialists, and the newly established *NTV Moldova*, which is owned by the Socialist deputy Corneliu Furculiță.<sup>168</sup> As some media sources claim, an agreement was made between Democratic Party leader Vladimir Plahotniuc and Socialist leader Igor Dodon. According to the agreement, *NTV Moldova* would have no problem securing a licence to operate if Plahotniuc's advertising agency *Casa Media Sales House* would be its media buyer.<sup>169</sup>

163 Media monitoring report. Independent Journalism Centre, 2015. Source: <http://media-azi.md/ro/publicatii/raport-nr2-monitorizarea-mass-media-%C3%AEn-campania-electoral%C4%83-pentru-alegerile-locale> (last accessed 6 April 2016)

164 Source: <http://www.jurnaltv.md/ro/news/2014/10/30/scandal-la-vocea-basarabiei-quot-10071077/>

165 The author's personal observation.

166 Media monitoring during the parliamentary election campaign in 2014. Independent Journalism Centre, Chisinau, 2014. Source: <http://media-azi.md/ro/publicatii/raport-final-monitorizarea-mass-media-%C3%AEn-campania-electoral%C4%83-pentru-alegerile> (last accessed 5 May 2016)

167 Media monitoring reports conducted by the Independent Journalism Centre. Source: <http://media-azi.md/ro/publicatii>

168 Исследование NM: как поделен молдавский телерынок. Newsmaker.md. February 2016. Source: <http://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/issledovanie-nm-kak-podelen-moldavskiy-telerynok-22680> (last accessed 6 April, 2016)

169 Либерал-демократ Кирилл Лучинский может продать часть медиа-активов. February 2016. Source: <http://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/liberal-demokrat-kirill-luchinskiy-mozhet-prodat-chast-media-aktivov-22399>. (last accessed 5 May 2016)

*NTV Moldova* broadcasts local newscasts and talk shows but also re-broadcasts *NTV* programs from Russia. Since *NTV Moldova* started broadcasting only recently, no data on its behaviour is available. Media experts have noted, however, that the editorial policy of *NTV Moldova* is exclusively based on promoting the Party of Socialists.<sup>170</sup>

In addition to their influence over these two TV stations, Party of Socialists representatives own the newspaper and web portal *Argumenti i fakte*, *tsn.md*, as well as control the newspaper *Panorama* and the web portal [actualitati.md](http://actualitati.md). During elections in 2014 and 2015, the newspaper *Panorama* and *Accent TV* were the main media backing the socialists. Their efforts resulted in the election of the Socialist candidate Irina Vlah as Governor of Găgăuzia and winning additional seats in Parliament in 2014.

Another important broadcaster, *Jurnal TV*, is one of few influential TV stations in Moldova that do not re-broadcast programs from Russia. All newscasts, talk shows, and entertainment programmes are locally produced, while movies are purchased. The owner of the station is Victor Țopa, a Moldovan businessman who runs his business from Germany, where he fled after being convicted of blackmail in Moldova. He claims he was the victim in a case staged by Plahotniuc.<sup>171</sup>

170 Sorina Stefarta, Editor at Mediaticritica.md web portal, June 3 Source: 2016.

171 Source: <http://unimedia.info/stiri/doc-victor-Topa-reactioneaza-sunt-con-damnat-dupa-ce-l-am-demascat-pe-plahotniuc-40319.html>



From its inception in 2009, *Jurnal TV* has acted as an opposition TV station and regularly criticizes the government, specifically Democratic Party (PDM) leader Plahotniuc. Taking into account audience numbers, especially for socio-political news,<sup>172</sup> it can be said that *Jurnal TV* plays a substantial role in influencing people and forming public opinion. For instance, public opinion polls conducted in 2015 have shown a significant increase in the credibility ratings for Andrei Nastase, one of the PPDA leaders who is intensively promoted on *Jurnal TV*.<sup>173</sup> Mr Nastase has family ties with *Jurnal TV* owner Victor Țopa.

The TV station was heavily biased against the Democratic Party in the election campaigns. According to *BCC*

172 Measuring perceptions of socio-political news by the media audience in the Republic of Moldova, Independent Journalism Centre, November 2015. Source: <http://media-azi.md/sites/default/files/Studiu-calitativ%202015-eng.pdf> (last accessed 6 April 2016)

173 Public Opinion Barometer. Institute for Public Policies. April, 2015 Source: [http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/Brosura\\_BOP\\_11.2015\\_prima\\_parte\\_final.pdf](http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/Brosura_BOP_11.2015_prima_parte_final.pdf) (last accessed 6 April 2016)



monitoring reports, during the local elections in 2015 30% of its news content covered the Democratic Party, mostly in a negative light, and PDM candidates were not presented at all in the news on *Jurnal TV*.<sup>174</sup> In contrast, the station intensively promoted the PPDA platform leaders that are covered exclusively in positive light. Thus, 64% of the content of evening newscasts from 6 to 27 September 2016 was about the PPDA platform, most of it neutral or positive.<sup>175</sup> Media monitoring reports also assessed manipulation techniques showing that, in some cases, *Jurnal TV* resorted to manipulation in order to promote certain messages against Vladimir Plahotniuc and in favour of PPDA leaders.<sup>176</sup>

It is worth mentioning that the recently established political party, the Dignity and Truth Platform, is backed by *Jurnal TV*, along with *Jurnal FM*, *jurnal.md*, and the *Jurnal de Chisinau* newspaper, which all promote the party's actions, specifically their non-stop protests.

174 Media monitoring report. Broadcasting Coordinating Council. June 2015

175 Media monitoring report. Broadcasting Coordinating Council. Source: [http://cca.md/files/Raport%20de%20monitorizare%20cu%20privire%20la%20protestele%20organizate\\_0.pdf](http://cca.md/files/Raport%20de%20monitorizare%20cu%20privire%20la%20protestele%20organizate_0.pdf) (last accessed 15 May, 2016)

176 'Measuring perceptions of socio-political news by the media audience in the Republic of Moldova', Independent Journalism Centre, November 2015. Source: <http://media-azi.md/sites/default/files/Studiu-calitativ%202015-eng.pdf> (last accessed 6 April, 2016)

Monitoring Report nr.1: 'Elements of propaganda, disinformation and informational war in the domestic mass media', Independent Journalism Centre, February 2016. Source: <http://media-azi.md/en/monitoring-report-nr1-elements-propaganda-disinformation-and-informational-war-domestic-mass-media> (last accessed March 31 2016)

As some case studies have shown, by asking/urging people to join protesters and by extensively promoting the viewpoints of PPDA leaders, these media outlets are biased and infringe on the professional ethical standards of objectivity and balance.<sup>177</sup>

The two public broadcasters in Moldova—*Teleradio Moldova* and *Teleradio Gagauzia*—are partly funded with public money. Since the government decides on the budget, there is a danger that these stations will favour the government or the local authorities. This is obvious, especially in the case of the regional broadcaster that supported the local administration during the last local elections in 2015.<sup>178</sup>

There is no recent data on how the central and local administrations have distributed state advertising in the media, but research conducted in 2008 by the Independent Journalism Centre showed that, as a rule, such advertising contracts are given to media that are loyal to the authorities.<sup>179</sup>

177 Studiu de caz. Protestul din 24 aprilie de la Chişinău: manipulare şi dezinformare en-gros. *Mediacritica*. Source: <http://mediacritica.md/studiu-de-caz-protestul-din-24-aprilie-de-la-chisinau-manipulare-si-dezinformare-en-gros/> (last accessed 15 June 2016)

178 Source: <http://trm.md/ro/regional/unele-institutii-media-din-gagauzia-nu-au-un-comportament-corect-in-campania-electorala-raport>

179 Relatiile dintre mass media si autoritatile de stat – spre transparent si responsabilitate. Independent Journalism Center, 2008. Source: <http://media-azi.md/ro/publicatii/studiul-rela%C5%A3iile-dintre-mass-media-%C5%9Fi-autorit%C4%83%C5%A3ile-de-stat-spre-transparen%C5%A3%C4%83-%C5%9Fi>

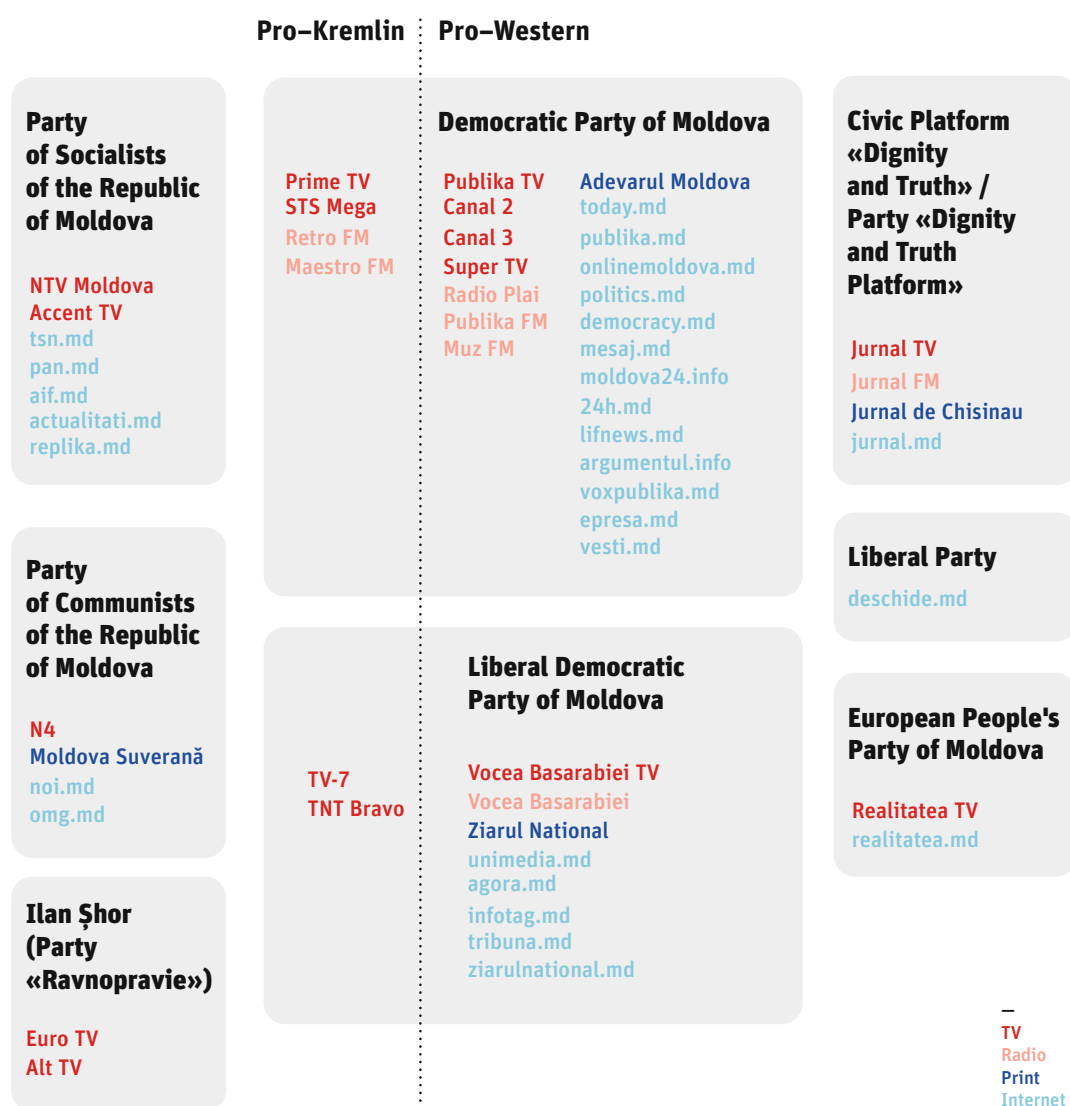


## MAPPING OWNERSHIP (VIOREL PARVAN)

Summarizing the information from documents, reports, press articles, and interviews the following chart 'Concentration of Media' was created. Vlad Plahotniuc plays a dominant role in the television and advertising markets. He also exerts his influence on certain newspapers and web platforms and is thought to have influence over some cable companies

as well. Some of the other influential politicians and businessmen in the media include Dan Lozovan, Chiril Lucinschi, and Dumitru Țîra. The mass media is largely affiliated either directly or indirectly with certain people, but also with political parties. The chart 'Media affiliated with Moldovan parties' attempts to document the relationships between the owners, political parties, and their position on pro-Kremlin or pro-Western axis.

### MEDIA AFFILIATED WITH MOLDOVAN PARTIES



## CONCENTRATION OF MEDIA

**Vladimir Plahotniuc**

**Publika TV**  
publika.md  
voxpublika.md  
**Canal 2**  
canal2.md  
**Canal 3**  
canal3.md  
**STS Mega**  
**Prime TV**  
prime.md  
**Super TV**

**Publika FM**  
**Retro FM**  
retrofm.md  
**Muz FM**  
muzfm.md  
epresa.md  
autostrada.md  
vesti.md  
24h.md  
zumi.md

**Victor Ţopa**

**Jurnal TV**  
**Jurnal FM**  
**Jurnal de Chisinau**

jurnaltv.md  
jurnal.md  
jc.md

**Ilan Shor**

**Euro TV**  
**Alt TV**

eurotv.md  
alttv.md

**Dumitru Ţîra**

**Realitatea TV**

realitatea.md  
kankan.md  
bani.md  
stireata.md  
topmedia.md

**Chiril Lucinschi**

**TV-7**  
**TNT Bravo**

tv7.md

**Dan Lozovan**

**HIT FM**  
**Rado Stil**

**Radio Alla**

**Offshore companies**

**RTR**  
**REN-TV**  
**Pro TV**

**NTV**  
**TV-21**  
**Acasa**

—  
**TV**  
**Radio**  
**Print**  
**Internet**

## FOREIGN ACTORS

A major issue that has recently been on the agenda of local politicians, civil society, and the Moldovan media is the influence of foreign media on the Moldovan public in the context of an information confrontation. Judging by the level of use and trust in foreign media coverage of socio-political information, one can say that Russian media are important players in the Moldovan information space. About 36% of the population consults Russian media on a daily basis and 60% of that audience likes the content. 14% of the population consumes Romanian media and 48% of them like the content, while US media attracts just 1.1% of population with 23% saying they like the content.<sup>180</sup>

Russian media are the most trusted news source among Moldovan consumers at 49% of respondents, while only 40% stated that they trust Moldova media.<sup>181</sup> 35% of respondents said they trust European media and 28% trust Romanian media. The trend continues in regard to the popularity of foreign political leaders. Kremlin leader Vladimir Putin is the most popular politician among Moldovans with a 62% approval rate.

180 Measuring perceptions of socio-political news by the media audience in the Republic of Moldova, Independent Journalism Center, November 2015.

Source: <http://media-azi.md/ro/publicatii/studiul-%E2%80%9Em%C4%83surarea-percep%C8%9Biei-consumatorilor-de-media-din-republica-moldova-asupra> (last accessed 6 April, 2016)

181 Barometer of Public Opinion. Institute for Public Policies, April 2016. Source: [http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/BOP\\_04.2016\\_prima\\_parte\\_finale-r.pdf](http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/BOP_04.2016_prima_parte_finale-r.pdf) (last accessed 20 May 2016)

Comparable figures were 33.5% for the Romanian president, 25.3% for the American president, and 10.7% for the Ukrainian leader.<sup>182</sup>

The impact of the media on forming public opinion is shown in answers to questions assessing perceptions regarding the role of specific countries in maintaining world stability based on knowledge gathered through various means. 40% of the population see Russia as a guarantor of peace and a factor in stability compared with 21% who believed the country was a destabilizing factor. Notably, 80% of those who see Russia as a peacekeeper and 58% of those who see the US as a destabilizing factor identified as ethnic minorities.<sup>183</sup> These are the consequences of the fact that most people in Moldova get their news from Russian TV stations. For instance, *Prime TV*, which rebroadcasts the Russian station *Pervii Kanal*, had the highest figure in terms of socio-political news consumption at 53%, while *RTR Moldova*, *REN TV Moldova*, and *TV7*, which used to rebroadcast content provided by *NTV*, also had relatively high news consumption rates of 18%, 10%, and 9.7%, respectively.<sup>184</sup>

The consequences of Russian media influence on the 2014 parliamentary election results are noteworthy.

182 Ibid.

183 Measuring perceptions of socio-political news by the media audience in the Republic of Moldova, Independent Journalism Centre, November 2015. Source: <http://media-azi.md/ro/publicatii/studiul-%E2%80%9Em%C4%83surarea-percep%C8%9Biei-consumatorilor-de-media-din-republica-moldova-asupra> (last accessed 6 April 2016)

184 Ibid.

The Party of Socialists and its leader Igor Dodon exploited the images of Russian leaders, assuring voters that Moldova's relationship with Russia would improve substantially if the Socialists won. In the autonomous region of Gagauzia, the pro-Kremlin candidate Irina Vlah won the election for Bashkan [local governor] in March 2015. Russian TV stations gave Vlah's campaign positive coverage, which had the desired effect.<sup>185</sup>

In addition to media from the Russian Federation and media funded by local politicians, there are a number of independent outlets, which struggle to survive in a media market marked by disloyal competition. Given the undersized advertising market and its monopolization by politicians, these media outlets cannot operate without financial support provided by international donors through various media development programs. During the last decade, a series of projects aimed at developing and strengthening the free and independent media in Moldova were conducted. Foreign donors have invested in establishing networks of local television outlets to enhance their ability to defend media interests. Examples of such networks include the *AICI TV Network*, created during a three-year Media Program in Moldova that was implemented by IREX with the financial support of the United States Agency for International Development. The goal of the project was to raise the level professionalism at the stations,

improve their performance as well-managed businesses, and ensure the distribution of local and regional news across Moldova. In addition, the program aimed to improve the capacity of the media in Transnistria to serve local information needs.

The second network is the *Regional Broadcasters Association MERIDIAN*, a network of local television and radio stations supported by the Soros Foundation-Moldova. The goal of the project was to strengthen good and democratic governance in Moldova through increased public participation in decision-making at the local and national levels, and to promote social inclusion policies for all groups. The Soros Foundation-Moldova also implements additional media programs with the goal of building the capacity of independent regional media to deliver objective, unbiased, and reliable information on the complex democratic development issues of the country and the EU Association Agreement to the rural population, with a particular focus on Russian-speaking regions.

The Council of Europe and the European Union Joint Program on Democracy Support in the Republic of Moldova supported the reforms carried out at the BCC and at the public broadcaster *Teleradio-Moldova* through strengthening professionalism and introducing guarantees for the independence of the broadcasting regulatory authority.

**Among other donors that** support the development of independent media in Moldova are Finland, the Netherlands, Slovakia, the United

185 Nadine Gogu, Who really rules the airwaves in Moldova? Open Democracy. March 2016. Source: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/nadine-gogu/who-really-rules-airwaves-in-moldova> (last accessed 6 April 2016)

Kingdom, the United States, and the European Commission in Moldova. Due to these programs, independent media outlets can attract funds to cover production expenses and do not have to depend on local politicians. The main condition international donors require for their support is fair and objective coverage of events, and to urge the government to implement reforms and be accountable to the public.

# LANDSCAPING THE MEDIA MARKET AND IDEOLOGICAL POSITIONING

IDIS Viitorul—Igor Munteanu

News-making is a powerful instrument for shaping public sentiment. We have attempted to map the Moldovan media in order to highlight its variety. Three factors were considered in positioning the various media outlets on the chart: (1) Are the media outlets state owned or privately owned? (2) Do they broadcast in Russian or in Romanian? (3) Do they use cultural/geopolitical framing? Ownership data is publicly available, but the rest of the information was gleaned by surveying the editorial line of each media outlet.

There are several reasons the Moldovan media environment does not live up to Western journalistic ideals. These include Russian influence and problematic ownership issues. The media is concentrated in the hands of wealthy groups, who can instil a rigid editorial policy. In addition, the largest media conglomerates are often owned by global offshore business.

Charting the ideological positioning of media is fuzzy and subjective. Based on our judgement and the available data, the most influential outlets are positioned on a graph. Media is

plotted according to their editorial policy (pro-Kremlin, mixed, or. pro-Western), and to ownership type (state-controlled, privately funded). Both national and regional media are included. The funding states include not only Moldova, and Russia but also Ukraine and Western governments.

Moldovan media regulations do not stipulate editorial policies or ownership rights, which makes mapping more subjective. For some outlets pro-Kremlin/pro-Western attitudes are difficult to evaluate. Even the positioning of the Kremlin's news outlet Sputnik is challenging. It is a Russian-state news channel reflecting the official position of the Russian authorities, but it is also platform for the unofficial and more radical views of the Kremlin propagandists. 'Mixed' columns implies platforms that are either neutral or change their position.



## PLATFORMS AND BIAS

| Privately funded  |  |  | State funded   |                               |  |
|---|--|--|--|-------------------------------|--|
| Pro-Kremlin   | Mixed  | Pro-Western  | Pro-Kremlin  | Mixed                         | Pro-Western  |
| Accent TV<br>TV-7<br>TNT Bravo<br>TVC-21<br>EURO TV<br>N4<br>ALT TV/Orhei TV<br>Prime TV*<br>NTV Moldova*<br>RTR Moldova*<br>Rossia-1*<br><br>Panorama<br>Moldavskie Vedomosti<br>AiF<br>Komsomolskaya Pravda<br>v Moldove*<br><br>Prime FM<br>INFOTAG<br>Life News<br>Sputnik* | Realitatea TV<br><br>MAKLER<br>LOGOS-PRESS<br>Kommersant | Publika-TV<br>Canal 2<br>Canal 3<br>Jurnal-TV<br>Pro TV<br>Acasa TV Moldova<br><br>Publika-FM<br>Vocea Basarabiei<br>Kiss FM<br>Radio Noroc<br>Pro FM<br>Radio Nova<br><br>Jurnal National<br>Ziarul de Garda<br>TIMPUL<br><br>iPN<br>Unimedia<br>agora.md<br>newsmaker.md | REN-TV<br>Regional IPNA<br>Teleradio Gaugauzia<br><br>RIA-Novosti<br>ITAR-TASS<br>Regnum<br>lenta.ru | CTC (Ukraine)<br>TVR1<br>TVR2 | Regional TV<br>IPNA Teleradio<br>Moldova<br><br>RFE/RL Radio<br>Deutsche Welle<br>BBC<br>RFI<br>Radio Chisinau |
| — reproduces mostly state funded content<br>News Agencies and other news-making media<br>TV companies<br>Radio stations broadcasted in Moldova<br>Private printed media   |  |  |  |                               |  |

## LANGUAGES AND BIAS

| Privately funded   |  |  | State funded  |                               |  |
|--|--|--|---|-------------------------------|--|
| Pro-Kremlin  | Mixed  | Pro-Western  | Pro-Kremlin   | Mixed                         | Pro-Western  |
| Panorama<br>Moldavskie<br>Vedomosti<br>AiF<br>Prime TV*<br>INFOTAG<br>Life News<br>Accent TV<br>TV-7<br>TNT Bravo<br>TVC-21<br>NTV Moldova*<br>RTR Moldova*<br>Rossia-1*<br>Sputnik*<br>Komsomolskaya Pravda<br>v Moldove*<br><br>EURO TV<br>N4<br>ALT TV/Orhei TV | MAKLER<br>LOGOS-PRESS<br>Kommersant<br><br>Realitatea TV | Publika-TV<br>Canal 2<br>Canal 3<br>Jurnal-TV<br>Pro TV<br>Acasa TV Moldova<br>iPN<br>Unimedia<br>Publika FM<br>Vocea Basarabiei<br>Kiss FM<br>Radio Noroc<br>Pro FM<br>Jurnal National<br>Ziarul de Garda<br>TIMPUL<br><br>newsmaker.md | REN-TV<br>Regional IPNA<br>Teleradio Gaugauzia<br>RIA-Novosti<br>Regnum<br>lenta.ru | CTC (Ukraine)<br>TVR1<br>TVR2 | RFE/RL Radio<br>Deutsche Welle<br>BBC<br>RFI<br>Radio Chisinau<br>Regional TV<br>IPNA Teleradio<br>Moldova |
| — reproduces mostly state funded content<br>Media outlets in Romanian<br>Media outlets in Russian  |  |  |   |                               |  |

The graph shows that Russian content and worldview have wide penetration. Russian language services have much larger audiences than would be expected from looking solely at the number of ethnic Russian speakers. One of the main factors determining media consumption is the language in which information is sought. Almost 80% of the public give preference to information in Russian, albeit to different extents, and 11% access information only in the Russian language.<sup>186</sup>

There is a tendency that there is more state sponsored content in Russian channels, while content in Romanian comes from private owned media. The concentration of Russian language media is obvious in such a small market, where the largest national licenses belong to the companies that rebroadcast popular Russian state-owned programs in Moldova. This pattern is replicated by dozens of private cable TV channels across the country. Linguistic divisions remain sharp. During the search for a national and state identity in Moldova, political manipulation by those who seek to exploit identity gaps and gain supporters is a significant danger.

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186 Independent Journalism Centre (new portal of IJC is [www.media-azi.md](http://www.media-azi.md)), 'Measuring the perception of the average consumer in Moldova on social-political news', November 2015. Source: <http://media-azi.md/ro/stiri/studiu-cji-70-dintre-consumatorii-de-media-din-r-moldova-sus%C8%9Bin-c%C4%83-presamanipuleaz%C4%83> (last accessed on 27.04.2016)

# THE MAIN INFLUENCERS OF PUBLIC OPINION.

IDIS Viitorul – Marin Cepoi

## ABSTRACT

This chapter attempts to identify and characterize the main Moldovan opinion leaders, and link them to the political currents promoted by the main mass media channels. We classify the opinion leaders according to their political preferences, affiliations, and external orientation, supplemented by other personal history. A subjective look is taken at their lives and work experience, ideas they have promoted in the past, links with important people and organization, their interests, and other elements that can help to explain their actions in the public sphere. The chapter focuses separately on four groups: pro-government media and opinion leaders, non-Plahotniuc media and opinion leaders, promoters of Kremlin narratives, and emerging opinion leaders. According to our study, some of the most influential opinion-makers were Corneliu Ciurea, Serghei Ostaf, Veaceslav Ionita, Victor Gurau, and Alexandru Cauia, all of whom are linked to pro-Plahotniuc media and

platforms.<sup>187</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

For Moldovans, television is the main source of information about politics.<sup>188</sup> Another important avenue for shaping opinions, especially among elites, are

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187 Subjective evaluation of opinion leaders highlights the variety of opinions in the Moldovan public space and is based on the expertise of the author. The author works for IDIS Viitorul, which is itself an important opinion leader; many IDIS Viitorul associates are closely linked to Moldovan political networks. Therefore, these characterizations might reflect an unnecessary bias. The characterizations do not reflect the opinions of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, the Alliance or the countries associated with the Centre.

188 The most watched TV talk-shows are: Moldova in direct [Moldova 1 TV], Puterea a 4-a [N4 TV], Replica [Prime TV], Politica [TV7], In PROfunzime [Pro TV Chisinau], Fabrica [Publika TV], Tema Zilei [Canal 3], Pahomi [Realitatea TV], Cabinetul din umbra [Jurnal TV], Tara lui Dogaru [Publika], Peatnita s Anatoliem Golea [RTR], MEGAfon/Glavnii Vapros [NTV Moldova], Punctul pe AZI [TVR Moldova], Unimedia [Alb&Negru], 1+1 [Accent TV]. The talk show 'Puterea a patra' [Timpul.md], 2014. Source: <http://www.timpul.md/articol/emisiunea-puterea-a-patra---lider-de-audienta-63960.html> (Last accessed 11 April 2016)

## MOLDOVAN OPINION LEADERS LANDSCAPE

| Promote ideologies of others   |  | Express independent views                 |  |  |
|--|--|---|--|--|
| Pro-Kremlin  | Pro-Western  | Pro-Kremlin                               | Moldovenists   | Pro-Western  |
| <b>Vlad Batrincea</b><br><b>Bogdan Tirdea</b><br><b>Victor Gurau</b><br><br>Vitalie Andrievschi<br>Iurie Risca<br>Alexandr Odintov | <b>Alexandru Cauia</b><br><b>Corneliu Ciurea</b><br><b>Sergei Ostaf</b><br><b>Victor Nichitus</b><br><b>Vitalie Catana</b><br><b>Roman Chirca</b><br><b>Veaceslav Ionita</b><br><b>Roman Mihaies</b><br><br>Cristi Tabara<br>Alexandru Solcan<br>Ion Tabarta | <b>Valerii Ostalep</b><br><br>Zurab Todua | Vitalie Gamurari<br>Vladimir Soloviov<br><b>Natalia Morari</b><br><br>Alexei Tulbure<br>Vitalie Sprinceana<br>Valeriu Renita<br>Dumitru Ciubasenco<br>Valerii Demidetchi<br>Ernest Vardanean<br>Nicolae Chirtoaca<br>Aurelian Lavric | <b>Oazu Nantoi</b><br><b>Igor Botan</b><br><b>Victor Juc</b><br><b>Iulian Groza</b><br><b>Anatol Taranu</b><br><b>Vasile Botnaru</b><br><b>Victor Ciobanu</b><br><br>Viorel Girbu<br>Sergiu Tofilat<br>Victor Chironda<br>Arcadie Barbarosie<br>Alexandru Machedon<br>Iulian Chifu<br>Nicolae Negru<br>Ion Terguta<br>Petru Macovei<br>Valentin Buda<br>Viorel Chivriga<br>Ion Stefanita<br>Igor Munteanu<br>Gheorghe Cojocaru<br>Octavian Ticu<br>Vitalie Calugareanu |

—  
Appears regularly on pro-Plahotniuc media such as Publika TV, Prime TV  
Appears regularly on pro-Kremlin media such as NTV, Accent TV, Sputnik  
Independent actors, regularly appearing on media such as RFE, TVR Moldova, National.md

public events and debate platforms.<sup>189</sup> Therefore, we looked primarily at the people who were asked to appear on different television programs and at public events. The rankings, charts, and descriptions were made after analysing the content of TV talk shows, websites, radio content, and

public events for a period of three to five months, taking into consideration the author has been accumulating knowledge and making observations for more than six years. In the following chart, we have mapped influential opinion makers, and based on their independence and position on pro-Kremlin vs. pro-Western positioning in their public comments. Annex 2 describes the criteria for these rankings.

Today, the Moldovan public space is more varied than ever. Opinion leaders take a wide range of positions including: pro-European, pro-Kremlin, pro-Third-Way, Moldovenists, pro-Romania, anti-Russia, pro-radical reforms, pro-Plahotniuc, pro-

189 The most frequently held and best attended events are organized by—IDIS (Institute for Development and Social Initiatives), APE (Foreign Policy Association), Expert Group, IPRE (Institute for European Policies and Reforms), Promo-LEX Association, TI (Transparency International – Moldova), CID NATO in Chisinau, International Media Club Format A3 Chisinau, Sputnik, Novosti-Moldova (branch Ria Novosti), Press Club. Top 10 NGO's that influence politics. Tribuna.md, 2012. Source: <http://tribuna.md/2012/10/21/top-10-ong-cu-%E2%80%9Einfluenta%E2%80%9D-asupra-politicienilor/> (Last accessed 11 April 2016)

protests, etc. The graphs above depict the political positions of the most influential opinion leaders by affiliation and orientation according to the frequency of their appearances on various politically oriented TV talk shows.

## PRO-GOVERNMENT MEDIA AND OPINION LEADERS

The most influential and promoted opinion leaders are Cornel Ciurea, Serghei Ostaf, Veaceslav Ionita, Victor Gurau, Alexandru Cauia, and Victor Catana. They are frequently invited<sup>190</sup> to appear as guests on TV channels such as *Publika TV* and *Prime TV* [both owned by Plahotniuc],<sup>191</sup> *Moldova 1*, *Realitatea TV*, and other channels indirectly controlled by Plahotniuc.<sup>192</sup> Based on our research, the most influential opinion makers can be characterized as promoters of Plahotniuc's ideas, the Democratic Party, government plans, etc. Cornel Ciurea is the most frequently invited commentator and the range of TV channels that invite him to appear is very wide. Some of the people who formerly did not support the Moldovan government have

changed their political affiliation. Our evaluation suggests that this is the case for Veaceslav Ionita, Serghei Ostaf, Roman Chirca, Vitalie Catana, and Alexandru Cauia. We also observe that they were/are mainly pro-European and even pro-NATO or pro-Romania, but have become supporters of the so-called 'Third Way'.<sup>193</sup> This approach is largely against Russian activities and Moldovenists, but pro-reform. This is different from the current establishment thinking, because it promotes the integration of Russian-speakers, and it is rationally critical towards the EU and NATO, and especially against unification with Romania—essentially maintaining status quo on external relations. Many opinion leaders are also involved in politics, for example Alexandru Cauia, who recently became president of the Democratic Party's youth organization. But there are also cases in which the opposite has happened, for example Roman Mihaies was previously a highly promoted speaker, but now is no longer invited to appear on Plahotniuc's stations. Not all the guests invited to appear on Plahotniuc's media outlets necessarily promote him, but at least they do not oppose him.

The editorial focus can also change quickly in the Moldovan media, e.g. *Publika* was previously interested in promoting the 98<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the unification of Bessarabia [the historical name for a territory that now comprises parts of Moldova and Ukraine] with Romania, while during the last years, *Publika* has taken a more sceptical Moldovenist approach. Still,

190 They appeared in 20-40% of talk shows within a 3-5 month period.

191 Plahotniuc's empire. Ziarul National, 2013. Source: <http://ziarulnational.md/imperiul-lui-plahotniuc> (Last accessed 11 April 2016)

192 The most powerful oligarch from Moldova controls state institutions and holds the Republic of Moldova as a 'captive state'. Appreciations given by the General Secretary of the Council of Europe and US Ambassador to Moldova. Jurnal TV, 2015. Source: <http://www.jurnal.md/ro/politic/2015/10/6/ambasadorul-sua-moldova-un-stat-capturat-sectoare-importante-se-afla-sub-controlul-catorva-persoane/> (Last accessed 11 April 2016)

193 See Annex 1 for more information.

we judge *Publika* to be pro-European, pro-Romanian, pro-Third Way, anti-Russian, and neutral toward NATO.

These facts lead to the conclusion that the opinion-leader media landscape is largely shaped by Plahotniuc through attracting prospective charismatic intellectuals and promoting them on all of his TV channels.<sup>194</sup> In a poor country, even small amounts of money can have a significant effect. *Publika* pays valuable guests around 500 MDL per appearance.<sup>195</sup>

The opinion leaders described above are also often invited to appear on the *Moldova 1* national television network, which, at the moment, is influenced by the government under Plahotniuc's leadership. Overall, former Liberal Democrat prime ministers influenced the programming on *Moldova 1*. It is happening now too—*Moldova 1* invites guests and analysts who are loyal to the current government and, indirectly, to Plahotniuc's network.<sup>196</sup> Also, *Moldova 1* TV invites experts who try to stay objective, while not criticizing the government.

194 Prime TV, Canal 3, Canal 2, *Publika* TV. Official, Plahotniuc owns 4 TV and 3 radio channels. Site Anticoruptie.md, 2015. Source: <http://anticoruptie.md/ro/stiri/oficial-vlad-plahotniuc-proprietar-a-patru-televiziuni-si-trei-posturi-de-radio> (Last accessed 11 April 2016)

195 Information obtained from one expert invited to appear on *Publika*, but angry that he was not paid as much as his colleagues.

196 Plahotniuc's network—all of the people, institutions, parties, businesses, banks, etc. that Vladimir Plahotniuc controls directly or indirectly.

## NON-PLAHOTNIUC MEDIA AND OPINION LEADERS

Opinion leaders characterized by professionalism, independence, some of whom have been promoting activism and democracy since the 1990s, are lower down on the scale of influence and frequency of appearance. They appear on the more independent, objective, or pro-European mass-media institutions such as *Radio Free Europe*, *TVR Moldova*, *Pro TV Chisinau*, *Jurnal TV*, *TV7*, etc. These mass-media channels and the opinion leaders they promote, represent another current of thinking: pro-European, pro-radical reform, against defensive Russian politics, and usually pro-NATO and pro-Romanian. This cluster includes Igor Botan, Oazu Nantoi, Anatol Taranu, Nicolae Negru, Petru Macovei, and Vasile Botnaru to name a few. Radio Free Europe Moldova is one of the most popular and influential mass-media channels among pro-democracy elites and intellectuals. This radio station promotes only opinion leaders, who are incorruptible pro-reform professionals. Even more, RFE creates opinion leaders—although their approach is pro-European and pro-NATO, they strive to be objective.

Another emerging platform is Natalia Morari's talk show on *TV7*, which has also begun creating new opinion leaders. This channel is owned by Chiril Lucinschi,<sup>197</sup> MP from the

197 Who owns TV channels in Moldova? mold-street.com, 2015. Source: <http://www.mold-street.com/?go=news&n=4266> (Last accessed 15 April 2016)



Liberal Democrat Party, son of former a president of Moldova who used to be close to the Kremlin, and Morari's boyfriend. *TV7* used to transmit *NTV Russia*, but their agreement has ended. *NTV* refused to continue working with *TV7* after the local station decided to replace newscasts and analytical shows with other types of content. The re-transmission of *NTV* has been taken over by *NTV Moldova* owned by Igor Dodon.<sup>198</sup> The talk show *Politika* has created opinion leaders linked to Morari. Her talk show was once very popular among elites and intellectuals from Moldova, but has now been shut down. The talk show was 60% in Romanian and 40% in Russian. Morari promotes opinion leaders with different positions and views, mainly views that are pro-European, pro-reform, anti-Plahotniuc, and anti-Kremlin. Many of them are supporters of the Third Way. Third Way opinion leaders include Alexei Tulbure, Vitalie Sprinceana, Dumitru Ciubasenco, Valerii Ostalep, and Valeriu Demitetchi. Another of Morari's goals is to raise a new generation of political leaders, who also support the Moldovan project. She promotes young perspective activists/technocrats like Victor Chironda, Vitalie Sprinceana, Marin Ciobanu, Sergiu Tofilat, Viorel Girbu, Alexandru Machedon, and Ion Stefanita.

Another media channel from Moldova is *Jurnal TV*. It does not

<sup>198</sup> Chiril Lucinschi explains why *TV7* does not transmit Russian propaganda. *Ziarul National*, 2015. Source: <http://www.ziarulnational.md/chiril-lucinschi-explica-de-ce-tv7-nu-va-mai-difuzza-buletine-de-stiri-din-rusia/> (Last accessed 15 April 2016)

differ much from the two previously described channels, but it emphasises an anti-Plahotniuc tone. It is a highly partisan channel and the main platform for Andrei Nastase and his protest movement. If previously this channel was one of the most influential promoters of pro-Romania movements, today it is under the Platform of Dignity and Truth, which promotes the idea of a Moldovan society with a common goal—fighting against corruption and the oligarchs.<sup>199</sup>

In addition to TV and radio, and online news sites, other important ways of shaping opinion are participation in relevant public events and online social networks. The abovementioned opinion leaders are also most involved in pro-reform and pro-European public events.

## PROMOTION OF RUSSIAN NARRATIVES

On the left side of the graph are Moldovan opinion leaders who promote Russian thinking. Several common features characterize them: they are Moldovenists, and are against both NATO and Romania. Russian or Russian-language mass-media channels from Moldova promote this type of thinking. Many of their ideas come from pro-Kremlin radical forces that promote close relations with Russia, or even unification. Others are more flexible toward the EU and declare themselves to be pro-reform.

<sup>199</sup> Platform of Dignity and Truth—an anti-Plahotniuc protest movement, which grew into a political party. Some oligarchs, who are opponents of Plahotniuc, support the party financially.

Talk show guests are also often ethnically Russian, speak Russian, or are somehow close to Russia and its values.

*NTV Moldova/Accent TV*, which broadcasts the talk shows *Glavnii Vopros* and *1+1* in Russian, are pro-Kremlin channels. *NTV Moldova* is owned by politician Igor Dodon (PSRM) and transmits Russian *NTV*.<sup>200</sup> Talk shows on these networks have focused on criticizing the Moldovan government, and have also invited pro-European opinion leaders who are against the government, such as Victor Ciobanu and Oazu Nantoi, to appear as guests. But this seems to be changing. Steadily, *NTV Moldova* is offering an alternative to the government and European integration.<sup>201</sup>

This channel provides analytical and subjective interpretation or storytelling, even within the news. This is the style of Russian channels such as *Pervii Kanal*, *NTV*, *Rossia*, etc., because it is easy for ordinary people to understand.

The news and analysis site *sputnik.md* is also emerging as one of the most powerful tools of pro-Kremlin forces in Moldova. It started with anti-Government messaging and has now switched to a stronger pro-Eurasian, anti-European, anti-NATO, and anti-Romania agenda. The newspaper *Komsomolskaia Pravda*

(Комсомольская правда)<sup>202</sup> publishes subjective reports and editorials, but not news. It depicts Moldovan politics as a big mess. *Komsomolskaia Pravda* is not directly against the EU and neither does it directly promote the Eurasian Union, however, it uses stories about the refugee crisis to paint a disturbing picture of the EU. For many years, KP was the most popular newspaper in Moldova.<sup>203</sup>

Almost weekly, the Russian international news agency *Sputnik* organizes round table discussions and conferences with the most influential pro-Russia, anti-EU experts from Moldova and Russia, or from the EU through online video at the Kentford Office building, which houses the offices for *Sputnik* and *Ria Novosti Moldova*.<sup>204</sup> The list 'Pro-Russia events' shows the most highly promoted actors in descending order. Another event platform is the International Media Club Format A3 Chisinau,<sup>205</sup> and <sup>206</sup> which organizes political and cultural events in Chisinau and

200 Leader of Party of Socialists that promote joining the Eurasian Union and repeal of Association Agreement with EU. Site promis.md. Source: <http://www.promis.md/partide/psrm/>

201 See the example of emerging site Sputnik.md

202 Political news from Komsomolskaia Pravda. Source: <http://www.kp.md/politics> (Last accessed 11 April 2016)

203 Political news from Komsomolskaia Pravda. Source: <http://www.kp.md/politics> (Last accessed 11 April 2016)

204 Press center. Source: [http://sputnik.md/press\\_center/](http://sputnik.md/press_center/) (Last accessed 15 April 2016)

205 Site of Format A3 Platform. Source: <http://www.format-a3.ru/events/event-242/> (Last accessed 11 April 2016)

206 Source: <https://www.facebook.com/International-Media-Club-Format-A3-126923524023116/> (Last accessed 11 April 2016)

## OPINION LEADERS IN PRO-KREMLIN EVENTS

Bogdan Tirdea  
Vlad Batrincea  
Iurie Risca  
Valerii Ostalep  
Alexandr Odintov  
Zurab Todua  
Ghenadie Vaculovschi  
Vladimir Novosadiuc  
Emil Ciobu  
Andrei Neguta  
Ana Tkaci  
Vladimir Bukarski  
Igor Caldare  
Dumitru Ciubasenco  
Valeriu Demidetchi  
Alexei Tulbure  
Valeriu Renita

## SOME PROSPECTIVE OPINION LEADERS

Octavian Ticu  
Sergiu Tofilat  
Adrian Plesca  
Dumitru Alaiba  
Alexandru Tanase  
Virgil Pislariuc  
Dima Belan  
Dorin Dusciac  
Serghei Diaconu  
Vadim Brinzan  
Viorel Girbu  
Marin Ciobanu  
Alexandru Machedon  
Vladislav Gribincea  
Pavel Postica  
Ion Stefanita  
Vitalie Sprinceana  
Dumitru Roibu  
Victor Chironda  
Iulian Groza  
Vlad Batrincea

Tiraspol.<sup>207</sup> The Debate Club Izborsk, a Russian debate platform, opened a branch in Moldova with the goal of discussing the future national idea for Moldova. The group organizes conferences, analyses, and public debates to promote the Kremlin's plans in Moldova.<sup>208</sup>

During the course of this study, it emerged that a great many pro-Kremlin experts declare themselves to be directors, presidents of organizations, think tanks, etc., even if their respective organizations exist only on paper.

207 Site of Institute for Actual Economics. Source: <http://instaeco.ru/novosti/440-direktor-iae-nikita-isaev-obsudil-v-tiraspole-vozmozhnosti-uvlicheniya-tovarooborota-mezhdu-pridnestrovem-i-rossiej> (Last accessed 11 April 2016)

208 Rosca: Izborsk Club of Moldova as a platform for developing of National Idea, 2016. Source: [http://www.noi.md/md/news\\_id/82010](http://www.noi.md/md/news_id/82010) (Last accessed 11 April 2016)

## EMERGING OPINION LEADERS

A number of new opinion leaders are also emerging in the Moldovan political landscape, mainly young technocrats. They also include young politicians and activists, with increasing involvement in public life from both the left and the right sides of the political spectrum. Natalia Morari promotes many of them on her talk shows or at public events.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study on the current Moldovan information environment is essentially about how vulnerabilities are exploited by the Kremlin. The structure of the Moldovan media

environment and the people involved have a significant effect how public discourse takes place and which issues are discussed. This study highlights the importance of these issues and attempts to provide a new framework for studies on information environment.

The topics discussed in the national media and way in which they are discussed reflect a country's character, history, and current political climate. In Moldova the concerns stem from major current vulnerabilities, which include corruption, weak state structures, a dysfunctional political system, and the ways in which control over the regions of Transnistria and Gagauzia can potentially be leveraged for political gain. All of these issues are closely linked with both poverty and the lack of security many people feel.

Vulnerabilities are effectively used to foster mistrust and polarization in Moldova. In this study we use the word narrative to describe the clusters of ideas political actors and organizations use to promote their positions, focusing primarily on the particularly hostile narratives that, according to our analysis, are orchestrated by the Kremlin or pro-Kremlin actors.

The hostile narratives promoted by the Kremlin address real vulnerabilities using emotionally manipulative arguments—the desire to belong, to make independent decisions, to feel secure both physically and economically—rather than taking the time to engage reason as well. These narratives are particular to the

situation in Moldova, but they are very similar to narratives the Kremlin and allies have pushed in other countries within its sphere of influence.

Ideological narratives affect thinking and public behaviour via iconic images and powerful emotions tied to basic human needs. In Moldova they are mix of residual memories, political failures, and regional conflicts. The objective of 'Compatriots, *Russkii Mir*, and Soviet Nostalgia' is to create unity between Moldovans and Russians on an emotional, and even spiritual level. The ideological construction *Russkii Mir*, invoking the social importance of the Orthodox Church, the memory of loss and sacrifice endured during the Great Patriotic War, and drawing a clear distinction between Moldova and Romania are all ideas that have been introduced into the social discourse to nurture positive feelings about Eastern influence, and to differentiate it mentally from the West. Some pro-Kremlin groups are not necessarily friendly with each other, but are clearly united against what the West is offering, e.g. Orthodox priests and communist functionaries collaborated in demonstrating against legislation in support of equal rights/opportunities for people of both genders and all sexual orientations. In this case, ideological networks that otherwise may be at odds joined forces, sharing the same conservative mental space. Kremlin narratives concerning Moldova are infused with geopolitical rifts, based on linguistic, cultural, and political polarization. The narrative 'Federalization Ensures Equality' comprises acts and messages focusing on the equality of different peoples

in Moldova. Here Russia offers itself as an alternative to the leadership of the Moldovan government. Russian-speakers are portrayed as the most important linguistic minority in Moldova. This reasoning can be challenged, since there are more Ukrainian-speakers than Russian-speakers, closely followed by other linguistic minorities. Politically, federalization might give veto-rights to the areas of Transnistria and Gagauzia, which themselves are closely linked with Russia.

The narrative 'The European Union is Bad, Russia's Customs Union is What You Need' is at first glance about economics but the arguments it contains are often based on conservatism and fear mongering. 'Romania and NATO are a Threat to Peace' leverages the lack of security many people feel. Some political leaders are claiming that Moldova is in danger from Western expansionism and the alleged ambitions that NATO and Romania have on their eastern borders. These claims echo messages from the Kremlin and have worked well. Moldovans are largely in favour of both Putin and political neutrality, which suggests that large segments of the Moldovan population do not see the risks posed by the current Russian regime.

The ideas/arguments that make up the hostile narratives about Moldova overlap in many places and share many of the same features, e.g. ideological conservatism serves as the basis for positive messages about *Russkii Mir* or blaming the European Union.

Hostile narratives easily escape rational demands for consistency, e.g. the idea of *Russkii Mir* attempts to link Moldovans as a whole more closely with their former Russian rulers, while the federalization strategy claims facilitation of more self-determination for different groups in but actually could create wedges inside the country. These contradictions make little difference to the Kremlin, because its efforts are focused more on dividing opponents than offering anything sustainable of its own. It is important to understand each argument in a given narrative on its own merits, instead of accepting each one as part of an integrated whole. As a result local stakeholders are likely to accept or reject ideas as one selects food items from a buffet according to taste. Nevertheless, even if only bits and pieces of the Kremlin's hostile narratives are accepted, the strategy succeeds in driving and maintaining wedges between the various factions in today's disjointed Moldovan society.

The people's perceptions about internal and external political issues are thus affected by the media content they consume. For the most part, Moldovan people only have access to information that local powerbrokers or the Kremlin-controlled media want them to have. There are too many media outlets for them all to succeed as economically viable. This reduces the quality of the local media, and creates incentives for affluent actors with political agendas to influence programming.



Vladimir Plahotniuc, de facto leader of the Democratic Party, which is currently in power, owns the lion's share of the Moldovan media market. Consequently, most of the population has access to information that promotes his party, the current government, and Vladimir Plahotniuc himself, while discrediting other leaders. Some of the other influential politicians and businessmen in the media include Chiril Luchinschi, Vlad Filat, Vadim Ciubara, Victor Țopa, Dan Lozovan, Dumitru Țîra, and Ilan Shor. The influence of these politicians on media outlets is obvious, especially during election campaigns, when the media are extensively used to promote candidates and their programs.

In addition to media outlets owned by politicians, the Moldovan information space is dominated by Russian media outlets, which heavily manipulate the information they broadcast to propagate their political ideology. Surprisingly, Plahotniuc's television channels also run programming made by the Kremlin-controlled media.

Mr Plahotniuc's combination of business and political interests is also interesting from an analytical perspective. If his relationships with Kremlin controlled media are company-to-company or network-to-network relationships, they are driven by organizational logic, which in this case is purely about making a profit. But, if they are person-to-person relationships, it makes Plahotniuc's duplicitous position rather awkward.

The media is a content-carrying pipeline into people's living rooms and pockets. Political commentators such as journalists and researchers

are involved in creating the national agenda. Their independence varies greatly, as many seem to have vested interests. Our analysts have charted the political positions of the major actors in Moldova according to their social and political ties and the type of messaging they use. Although an evaluation of this nature can never be truly objective, it is a tool to gain a better understanding of how certain individuals make use of their positions and connections to influence the opinions of the Moldovan people. According to our study, some of the most influential opinion-leaders were Corneliu Ciurea, Serghei Ostaf, Veaceslav Ionita, Victor Gurau, and Alexandru Cauia, who also happen to be especially popular on the media platforms owned or influenced by Plahotniuc.

Because the situation in Moldova will remain challenging, there will be a constant stream of opportunities to negatively affect its fragile development. Hostile narratives can be fine-tuned and sustained with minimal effort. Adversarial forces don't have to actively worsen the current situation, as conditions are already difficult.

Adversaries can affect decision making by distorting the quality of information, controlling access to information, and influencing the perception and understanding of that information. There are several ways Moldova and its partners can help to protect Moldovan society on these issues.

**Improving information:** Quality of information should not be improved by adding even more channels, as the media environment is already



oversaturated. Western values can and should be promoted using the current media structures. The people who control the media channels and provide content are not unapproachable. Many central opinion makers are named in this study. Among them are speakers who participate in Moldovan public discourse and already share European values, or may do so in the future. In order for them to have all the facts, these people should be informed in a manner, which will not put them in a bad light. There is no obvious reason, why Western messaging could not be more prevalent in public events and media discussions.

**Offering quality content** to the existing popular channels is a way to reach audiences efficiently. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Moldova* has managed to have both Romanian and Russian language programming on Moldova's public TV and radio channels.

**Improving access to information:** Large segments of the Moldovan population barely participate in the Moldovan media space, but voluntarily rely on Kremlin media sources. It would be very difficult to change their media consumption habits by, for instance, simply offering a new satellite news channel. It would be difficult to reach these people solely through providing alternative journalistic content, but a start could be made through promoting appealing combination of entertaining and journalistic content. In Transnistria and Gagauzia there are even fewer opportunities to access Moldovan or Western content due to local broadcasting decisions,

so reaching them requires other technical solutions. A variety of co-operation projects could also be maintained to keep the populations in these regions from being isolated.

**Perception and understanding:** The third issue is the most difficult. As long as there is no widely shared vision about the present and the future, solutions remain partial. Moldova, both its authorities and citizens, bear the greatest responsibility in creating opportunities for the country. In addition, Western support for the Moldovan people, especially in terms of education, rule of law, other state structures, and quality journalism will bear fruit in the long run.

In the current situation, it is not self-evident that Western values are prevailing in Moldova. Neither the public sector, nor the public at large are clear about where they want to be heading. While the Kremlin is clearly making self-interested use of Moldovan vulnerabilities, the population itself is divided on a number of critical issues. In the game of politics self-interest, greed, and lust for money and power are often veiled, making evaluating information environment challenging. Large segments of Moldovan society are inclined to listen to political messaging originating from the Kremlin,<sup>209</sup> but to make things worse the pro-Western side is further divided, and less likely

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209 The Russian media has been seen as more trustworthy than Moldovan or European media. See the Barometer of Public Opinion, Institute for Public Policies, April 2016. Source: [http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/BOP\\_04.2016\\_prima\\_parte\\_finale-r.pdf](http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/BOP_04.2016_prima_parte_finale-r.pdf) (last accessed 20 May 2016)

to join forces to support a unifying agenda. The current understanding of European or Western values is often distorted either by their adversaries, or by non-credible political actors. There are many flag carriers for European values in Moldova, but plenty of unscrupulous individuals exploit fears about Russia for their own benefit, as well. In order for the voices of reason and stability to be heard more clearly in the Moldovan information environment, the country and its people will continue to need support from free and open societies.

To summarize the policy recommendations, we are suggesting improving the quality of journalism by leveraging the current media structures, targeted marketing, and projects aimed at bursting pro-Kremlin information bubbles, as well as continued co-operation in supporting the Moldovan response to improve the status of its vulnerabilities.

# ANNEX 1.

## GLOSSARY AND KEY POLITICAL PLAYERS

**Bessarabia**—an ancient historical name, possibly stretching back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, for the territory between the Prut, Dniester, and Danube Rivers and the Black Sea. In more recent times, it was annexed by the Tsarist Empire in 1812, which resulted in a policy of Russification contested by the ethnic Romanian population. The territory is now split between Moldova and Ukraine.

**Moldovenist**—used to denote the supporters of a Moldovan identity, as distinct from Romania. There are more Moldovenists among Russian-speakers. They are focusing on strengthening friendly ties with Russia, instead of Romania or the European Union.

**Plahotniuc's network**—in this study we use this term to describe persons, institutions, parties, business, banks, etc. controlled directly or indirectly by Vladimir Plahotniuc.

**The Third Way**—a movement in support of Moldova developing strategic relations with both West and East, not integrating into either, and seeking to defend its own self-interest. In fact, supporters of the Third Way tend toward maintenance of the status quo.

**Vulnerability** - According to the Romanian dictionary of neologisms, vulnerability is a weakness in

somebody or something.<sup>210</sup> The concept of vulnerability, has been used to refer to the risks of not being able to withstand a hostile environment. Recently it has grown increasingly important in studies on global environmental changes and sustainable development. In this study, vulnerability is something that can be intentionally exploited by different actors to the detriment of a state or of its citizens.

### Some prominent politicians

**Igor Dodon**—winner of the presidential election in 2016, leader of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova. He served as Minister of Trade and Economics (2006-2009). He left the Party of Communists and joined Party of Socialists in 2011.

**Vlad Filat**—former Moldovan Prime Minister (2009-2013), founder and President of the Liberal Democrat Party (PLDM) since 2007, and Plahotniuc's main opponent. In 2016 he was sentenced to nine years in prison for corruption and abuse of power while in office, charges he denies.

**Plahotniuc, Vladimir** —First Deputy Chairman of the Democrat Party of Moldova. Plahotniuc is Moldova's

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210 Florin MARCU, Great dictionary of neologisms, SAECULUM I.O. Printing House, Bucharest, 2000, p. 230.

leading oligarch, a media owner who controls many public institutions and business in Moldova.

**Maia Sandu**—Former Minister of Education (2012-2015). In 2016 she created a new political party, the centre-right Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), which has a social-liberal orientation. She lost the presidential election to Igor Dodon in 2016.

**Vladimir Voronin**—former President of Moldova (2001-2009) and has been the First Secretary of the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) since 1994.

#### **Abbreviations of the names of Moldovan political parties:**

**PSRM**—the Party of Socialists (Igor Dodon)

**PLDM**—the Liberal Democratic Party (Vlad Filat)

**PCRM**—the Party of Communists (Vladimir Voronin)

**PDM**—the Democratic Party (Marian Lupu)

**PL**—the Liberal Party (Mihai Ghimpu)

**PPEM**—the European People's Party of Moldova (Iurie Leancă)

**PAS**—the Action and Solidarity Party (Maia Sandu)

**PPDA**—the Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Andrei Năstase)

**PPCD**—the Christian Democrat People's Party (Iurie Rosca)

**PN**—the Our Party, previously the Republican People's Party (Renato Usatîi)

## ANNEX 2. MOLDOVAN OPINION LEADERS

Moldovan opinion makers are first classified by their role and their activity. The most important opinion leaders are then further analysed by their presentations and personal histories.<sup>211</sup>

Types of opinion makers:

1. Politicians, experts, commentators, journalists, bloggers, civic activists, etc.
2. Think-tanks, NGOs, debate platforms, other social and political movements

Criteria for identifying and ranking the most influential opinion leaders:

1. Frequency of appearance on TV talk-shows (ideologically affiliated and not affiliated)
2. Frequency of appearance in online media
3. Participation in important public events (appearing, initiating, organizing)
4. Popularity/activity on Facebook (the most popular social network for middle and upper class Moldovans)

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211 This subjective evaluation highlights the variety of opinions in the Moldovan public space and is based on the expertise of the author. The author works for IDIS Viitorul, which is itself an important opinion leader; many IDIS Viitorul associates are closely linked to Moldovan political networks. Therefore, these characterizations might reflect an unnecessary bias. The characterizations do not reflect the opinions of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, the Alliance or the countries associated with the Centre.

5. Professionalism/oratorical abilities, quality of debate/ideas generated, pertinent opinions, etc.
6. Number of mentions by other opinion leaders

Points considered:

1. Media appearances: which media
2. Curriculum Vitae: work experience, studies, life experience, family, etc.
3. Ideological position: pro-UE, pro-Kremlin, pro-Romania, pro-Moldovan project/'Moldovenist', a pro-Third Way, etc.
4. Thinking trend (thematic affiliation): pro-radical and deep reforms, pro-status quo, strong against corruption, strongly for economical reforms, etc.
5. Political affiliation: pro-PD (Plahotniuc), pro-PLDM (Filat), pro-PSRM (Dodon, Russia), pro-PN (Usatii, Russia), pro-Platform of Dignity and Truth (Nastase, Ţopa oligarchs), pro-PPEM (Leanca/Plahotniuc), pro-PAS (Sandu). Persons who are not affiliated with a party can be either sympathetic to some political party/movements or content focused without clear leaning to any groups.
6. Special links with influential people, organizations, and businesses from Moldova and abroad
7. General information
8. Professionalism, integrity







