

MOLDOVA



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2019

Tracking Development
of Sustainable
Independent Media
Around the World



MOLDOVA

AT A GLANCE

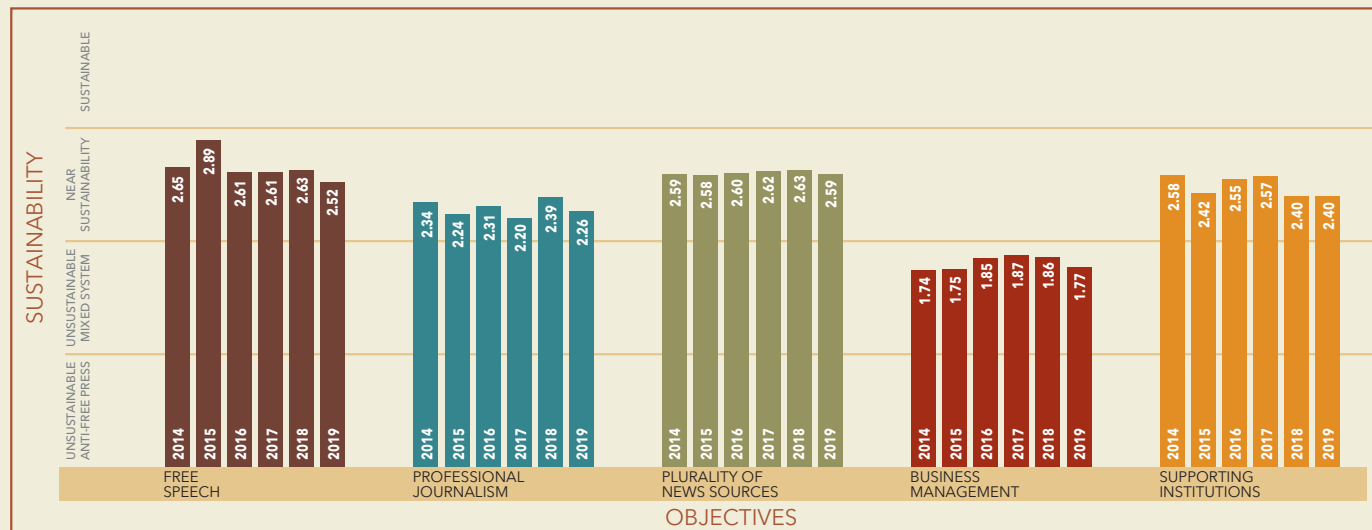
GENERAL

- **Population:** 3,437,720 (*CIA World Factbook*, 2018)
- **Capital city:** Chisinau
- **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Moldovan 75.1%, Romanian 7.0%, Ukrainian 6.6%, Russian 5.9%, Gagauz 4.6%, Bulgarian 1.9%, other 0.8% (*CIA World Factbook*, 2014)
- **Religions (% of population):** Orthodox 90.1%, other Christian 2.6%, other 0.1% (*CIA World Factbook*, 2014)
- **Languages:** Moldovan/Romanian 80.2% (official) (56.7% identify their mother tongue as Moldovan, which is virtually the same as Romanian; 23.5% identify Romanian as their mother tongue), Russian 9.7%, Gagauz 4.2% (a Turkish language), Ukrainian 3.9%, Bulgarian 1.5%, Romani 0.3%, other 0.2% (*CIA World Factbook*, 2014)
- **GDP at market prices:** \$23.72 billion (*CIA World Factbook*, 2017)
- **GDP per capita:** \$6,700 (*CIA World Factbook*, 2017)
- **GNI per capita:** \$ 2,180 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- **Literacy rate:** Total population: 99.4%, male: 99.7%, female: 99.1% (*CIA World Factbook*, 2015)
- **President or top authority:** President Igor Dodon (since December 23, 2016)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations, Internet news portals:** Print: 90 newspapers, 77 magazines ("Study on the Needs of Mass Media in the Republic of Moldova," IJC, 2017), radio stations: 55 (BCC, 2018), television stations: 62 (BCC, 2018), Internet news portals: 181 (IJC, 2017)
- **Broadcast ratings:** Competing surveys produce dissimilar results: Top-three television stations: Prime TV (private), Moldova 1 (public), Jurnal TV (private) (IPP, 2018). Top three radio stations: Radio Moldova (public), Radio Noroc (private), Radio Plai (private) (Internews, 2018)
- **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top three: *Komsomolskaia Pravda* (Russian), *Jurnal de Chisinau* (Romanian), *Argumenty i facty* (Russian)
- **Magazines:** Top three: *VIP magazine*, *Aquarelle*, *Agricultura Moldovei* (Media-azi.md, 2018)
- **Internet News Portals:** Top three: ProTV.md, Jurnal.md, Publika.md (Media-azi.md, 2018)
- **News agencies:** IPN, Moldpres (state-owned), Infotag, InfoMarket, Sputnik (part of the Russian news agency)
- **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** Television: €13.3 million, radio: €0.9 million, Internet: € 4.6 million, print: €0.9 million (AAPM, 2018)
- **Internet usage:** 2.6 million (72.8% of the population) (ANRCETI, 2018)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: MOLDOVA



SCORE KEY

Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1): Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2): Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

Near Sustainability (2-3): Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

Sustainable (3-4): Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.



The 2019 overall score for Moldova continues to place it in the near sustainability category, although it experienced a drop from its 2018 score of 2.38. Individual MSI objectives scores dropped across the board, except for Objective 5 (supporting institutions) which remained static at 2.40 in comparison to last year's study. Panelists attributed these overall declines to factors such as a deterioration in the application of the country's media laws, political partisanship related to local elections in 2018 and the scheduled 2019 parliamentary election, lack of improved pluralism, and continuing political influence throughout the media sector.

An internal political struggle between the pro-European Parliament and the pro-Russia president, Igor Dodon, added more heat to Moldova's simmering societal tensions in 2018. Dodon racked up four more suspensions in 2018 (making a total of five during his two years in office) for refusing to appoint new ministers and to pass laws voted in by Parliament. A political crisis following improperly invalidated local elections in Chisinau—won by Andrei Năstase, chair of the opposition Dignity and Truth Platform Party—and voting on a package of tax amnesty laws added to the tumult. The opposition said the laws would lead to the legalization of income and goods obtained illicitly.

The political maneuvers noticeably worsened the country's relations with external development partners, especially the European Union (EU) and the United States. In November, the European Parliament adopted a critical resolution denouncing the failure of democracy in Moldova. The document criticized the change in the electoral system, Chisinau's mayoral election, and concentration of economic and political power in the hands of a small group of people exercising influence over Parliament, political parties, the state administration, the police, the judiciary, and the media. Citing Moldova's failure to fulfill political commitments, the EU suspended the allocation of €100 million in macro-financial assistance.

In the political struggle, the main parties have transformed the most influential media outlets into their subordinate

echo chambers—copying the precedent of Ilan Shor, Orhei's controversial mayor sentenced to jail for bank fraud. In November 2018, using shell organizations, he launched two stations, Orhei TV and TV Centrala. Media captured by large political parties drastically diminished the prominence of the European integration theme—replacing it with propaganda related to the February 2019 parliamentary elections.

Russian propaganda continued to saturate the country's information space. In September, the Institute for European Policies and Reform released an analysis of news published in recent years by three Russian-language online media outlets (Sputnik.md, KP.md, Vedomosti.md) with a Moldovan presence. The analysis revealed that the outlets promoted the interests of the Russian Federation and that efforts by the Moldovan authorities have failed to stop external pro-Russia propaganda and its negative effects on Moldovan information space.

By the end of 2018, Parliament had managed to adopt four draft laws, including the Code for Audiovisual Media Services, drafted by a working group created in 2017 to improve the legal framework regulating media activities. However, important draft laws that had been developed and subjected to in-depth discussions, including one on advertising, were not adopted. In another disappointing move, in February 2018, the authorities again extended the term for the transition to digital terrestrial television—this time until March 1, 2020.

**OBJECTIVE 1:
FREEDOM OF
SPEECH**

2.52

Moldova's constitution guarantees freedom of speech, with dozens of supportive laws. Since 2010, Moldova has had a special law on the freedom of expression that sets out a framework and details the limits of this freedom. The country's media legislation is mostly in line with international standards, but, as in previous years, its application continues to be flawed—and in some areas, it has utterly deteriorated. As a result, this objective's score slipped slightly. Despite sound legislation, Alexandr Burdeinii, editor-in-chief of the news agency InfoMarket, and Marina Bzovaia, deputy editor-in-chief of the newspaper SP, said that the authorities either have a selective attitude toward providing information or simply refuse to provide it, artificially invoking the protection of personal information. In Gagauz Yeri (an autonomous region), the right to free speech is often violated, but citizens do not defend their rights in court. Zinaida Savenco, an Independent Journalism Center (IJC) project coordinator, noted that national legislation now provides sanctions for impeding the work of the media, but they have not yet been applied to establish precedents. An example was the assault on Radio Orhei journalists by Marina Tauber, the mayor of the commune Jora de Mijloc. The journalists filed a complaint with the police, but the criminal prosecution authority found no "elements of a crime."¹

1 "Police Have Found No Violations in the Actions of the Navy Tauber, Which Banished Journalists Radio Orhei from a Demonstration of Shor's Sympathizers." Media

Aneta Gonta, a university lecturer at the State University of Moldova and a media researcher, noted that no journalists were jailed in 2018 for refusing to disclose their sources; however, journalists reported at least five cases of intimidation or interference with their work. For example, the Rezina Prosecutor's Office accused a regional journalist of prank calling the police. In fact, the journalist only asked the police to check information about a possible crime following an anonymous tip. In another case in May, Rezina's local police seized an entire print run of *Cuvantul* (3,800 copies) due to a dispute over official documentation related to transporting the publication. The police involved were initially suspended but then reinstated. However, Ludmila Barbă, editor-in-chief of Moldova 1, shared a positive case: In July, a court dismissed an access-to-information claim by photojournalist Constantin Grigorita against the president, but in November, the Chisinau Court of Appeals ruled that the case should proceed, as the head of state is not entitled to immunity in cases concerning access to information of public interest.

Victor Mosneag, deputy editor-in-chief of *Ziarul de Garda*, recalled another case that illustrates political interference in the justice system. In April 2018, a panel of Chisinau Court of Appeals judges appointed by a presidential decree dismissed an appeal by RISE (the Association of Investigative Reporters and Editorial Security) Moldova Project journalists and forced the outlet to write a denial of information regarding a 2016 RISE Moldova article about funds received by 2016 presidential candidate, later elected president, Igor Dodon. In addition, Eugen Ribca, lawyer and director of Mold-Street, recalled the

AZI. September 6, 2019. <http://media-azi.md/ro/stiri/poli%C8%9Bia-nu-g%C4%83sit-%C3%AEnc%C4%83lc%C4%83ri-%C3%AEn-ac%C8%9Biunile-marinei-tauber-ca-re-alungat-cu-m%C4%83tura-jurnali%C8%99ti>.

attempted "Big Brother" law drafted in 2018, which would establish censorship in the online environment.

Corneliu Rusnac, editor-in-chief of Radio Chisinau, argued that freedom of speech is not, in fact, protected. While the criminal code provides, in certain cases, up to four years of imprisonment for "deliberate impediments to media activity or intimidation for criticism," the justice system avoids applying these provisions. For example, the Chisinau Prosecutor's Office refused to prosecute Shor on the grounds that his threats to pass a lustration law² to use against "inconvenient" journalists did not amount to a crime.³

Despite new legislative measures to improve the legal framework for media during the year, including the adoption of the new Code of Audiovisual Media Services and the National Media Development Concept, Valeriu Vasilica, director of IPN News Agency, said the new structure just replaced external propaganda with internal propaganda. In the Transnistrian region, Luisa Dorosenco, president of the Media Center in Tiraspol, said that although the law prohibits censorship, media outlets must submit all journalistic materials to the relevant ministry ahead of publication (per a 2015 central administration decision invoking the need to counter extremism and pornography). On the other hand, Transnistrian legislation does force the courts to publish their judgments online—although so far, they have not.

Burdeinii confirmed that licensing concerns

2 Lustration laws have been used to disqualify from employment persons who were associated with abuses under former Communist regimes in Europe, such as the Czech Republic, Poland, and Ukraine.

3 "Shame Will Not Be Held Accountable for Journalists' Threat. Here Is the Explanation of the Prosecutor's Office." Agora, November 2, 2019. <https://agora.md/stiri/51285/sor-nu-va-fi-tras-la-raspundere-pentru-amenintarea-jurnal-istilor-iata-explicatia-procuraturii>.

only broadcast media. Savenco noted that the Broadcast Coordinating Council (BCC), the media's regulatory body, gives preferential treatment to stations with certain political ties; they obtain licenses and funds much more easily. For example, BCC members were accused of favoring television stations affiliated with Vladimir Plahotniuc, the leader of the Democratic Party (PDM). Bzovaia noted the ease with which a new station—TV Nord—obtained its license. The station denied a relationship with GMG, Plahotniuc's holding group; however, other GMG stations air material produced by TV Nord. Tudor Darie, manager and cofounder of Interact Media Company, said that broadcasters critical of the government encounter problems, especially regarding the extension of their licenses, that create an incentive to ensure that their coverage does not inconvenience the government. Mosneag agreed that although the BCC did not refuse any television or radio licenses in 2018, the sense that it is biased toward, and controlled by, certain political groups persists.

Ribca said the broadcast licensing structure does not prevent monopolies; Viorica Zaharia, a journalist and the Press Council president, feels that the BCC not only fails to thwart monopolies but also that it encourages them. The process for obtaining a license or entering the market is sufficiently free from a legal point of view, Vasilica said, but BCC decisions ultimately undermine the interests of a free press and a democratic society.

In 2018, no new independent media outlets appeared, and existing outlets faced almost unprecedented problems. For example, TV8 was forced to take a long break, purportedly to resolve its financial problems.

As online media are unregulated, they can enter the market with greater ease than broadcast or print media, Savenco said—but, in general, no

media face legal obstacles to entering the market. On the contrary, Burdeinii noted, some media receive certain privileges—for example, periodical sales are exempt from value-added tax. However, Bzovaia commented that there are no other proper tax exemptions, such as equipment purchases, which non-profit media civil society organizations have repeatedly requested. In September, the government issued a negative opinion on two draft laws prepared by the media working group, set up by the speaker of the Parliament in 2017 to improve media legislation, that provided additional tax exemptions for media outlets—a response that puzzled Ribca, as the drafts reflected European best practices. Vasilica noted some reforms in taxes and salaries announced at the end of 2018, which were apparently meant to facilitate the media's work. He was skeptical, however, because these reforms will almost exclusively favor politically aligned media outlets because of their unfair competitive advantage. Zaharia said that so far, the authorities have not been interested in maintaining and developing media that are not politically controlled.

Burdeinii believed that civil society's apathetic reactions allowed attacks on journalists to continue in 2018. Savenco expressed disappointment that the frequent violations of journalists' rights do not stir public protest, although they are widely publicized, and perpetrators go unpunished.

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Bzovaia noted a shift in the government's tactics when obstructing investigative journalists.

Instead of filing lawsuits against journalists, the authorities try to discredit them through the media outlets that they control, as media outlets affiliated with PDM and the Party of Socialists (PSRM) did in response to investigations published by *SP*. Investigative journalists in Gagauz Yeri face similar trouble, and the Moldovan public does not intervene. Refusing journalists access to public events is another type of abuse that journalists endure, Darie noted; sometimes, guards at such events have lashed out aggressively at journalists (as happened to journalists working for *Agora.md* and *Radio Free Europe*). Barbă pointed to the case of Liuba Sevcuic, a RISE Moldova journalist. She said that a professional agitator followed her in September after the publication of an investigative piece titled "Oligarch's Paradise," describing Plahotniuc's houses abroad. Mosneag mentioned Viorica Tataru, a *Ziarul de Garda* journalist assaulted by a guard who forbade her from filming by a government building. While *Radio Free Europe's* Stefan Grigorita tried to film the incident, a law enforcement official seized his phone.

Gonta feels that the observance of journalists' rights regressed in 2018, with restrictions and even threats typically coming from political sources. Orhei's mayor made statements that could be categorized as hate speech against the journalists of *Jurnal TV*, for example, but faced no consequences. Vasilica said that offenses against journalists are random rather than systematic, but he believes that hate speech and threats against journalists intensified in 2018 with the tacit encouragement of public authorities who failed to react to statements issued by the media outlets concerned, by media NGOs, and by the Ombudsman of Moldova.

The law guarantees public media's editorial and managerial independence, Burdeinii noted. However, public broadcasters receive state funds, which influences the nomination of leaders based

on political considerations and which Darie believes leads to self-censorship. Gonta mentioned that under the law, public media managers should be elected democratically and should not be subject to outside influence. In fact, neither the members of the national and regional public broadcaster supervisory boards nor their managers are totally independent of politics. At the same time, Moldovan laws do not expressly favor public media or their journalists at the expense of private media.

Barbă pointed out that in 2018, the Code of Audiovisual Media Services of Moldova was passed, but Parliament did not approve a fixed share of the annual national budget for the public broadcaster Teleradio-Moldova, thus maintaining its dependence on state funding. In 2018, the political struggle for control over the regional public broadcaster in Gagauzia was clearly visible when its director was elected behind closed doors by the regional parliament. Vasilica feels that in 2018, public media, especially broadcasters, continued to be treated as “Cinderellas” through inadequate financing and politically motivated nominations, although formal public competitions for public service media boards and management positions take place with the participation of some civil society candidates. The results of the competitions are nonetheless predictable, perpetuating political control over public media. As a result, Zaharia believes that although public broadcasters benefit from a special status and are supported by public money, their editorial content often favors the governing forces.

Throughout 2018, sanctions applicable to journalists for libel and defamation tightened, according to Ribca. However, Burdeinii noted that experienced politicians who consider themselves defamed prefer to defend themselves through other media rather than in court. There were no libel trials in 2018, Bzovaia said, but some media outlets

endured harassment for noncompliance with the legislation on personal data protection. Libel in Moldova has been decriminalized, Vasilica added, which protects the media and journalists from certain abuses that are dangerous for their lives and work. At the same time, the current legal framework and court practices allow intimidation of the media in civil cases related to libel, including in cases that would unequivocally be inadmissible by European standards. For example, the news agency IPN is currently involved in five or six civil cases concerning “damaging dignity and professional reputation.” The agency is accused of disseminating public messages launched in public press conferences.

Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information.

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS

- ▶ Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- ▶ Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- ▶ Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- ▶ Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- ▶ Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- ▶ Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- ▶ Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- ▶ Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.
- ▶ State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.

The year 2018 brought no lawsuits related to libel in Gagauz Yeri either. One reason, Gonta believed, is that Moldovan legal regulations require both sides to prove each other's guilt in defamation cases. Darie said this explains the quasi agreement from the governing forces to use affiliated media to discredit inconvenient journalists rather than appealing through the judiciary.

The panelists agreed that access to information has grown more strained. Burdeinii noted that although legislation guarantees equal access to public information for all mass media, politically connected media receive special treatment. In most cases, Bzovaia said, public institutions demand written requests, drastically reducing the timeliness of the material. Although the Law on Access to Information requires turnaround on information requests within 15 days, the authorities usually take twice as long, intentionally invoking the Law on Petitioning, which provides for more days to answer information requests. In Gagauz Yeri, the media have wider access to information only because more documents are now placed on official websites. Otherwise, officials remain as reluctant as ever to provide information directly to journalists. Rusnac brought up an opinion poll ranking the institutions that hinder access to information the most, naming the presidency; the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Social Protection; the State Tax Service; the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Research; and the Chisinau Mayor's Office.⁴ The National Integrity Authority (NIA) has also emerged as one of the most hostile agencies in this respect. In 2018, it asked

4 “Access to Information: Journalists Have Named the Least Press-Friendly Institutions. The Presidency Came First.” Media AZI, May 4, 2018. <http://media-azi.md/ro/stiri/accesul-la-informa%C8%9Bie-jurnali%C8%99tii-au-indicat-in-stitu%C8%9Biile-cele-mai-%C3%AEnchise-fa%C8%9B%C4%83-de-pres%C4%83>.

journalists to submit written applications for access to information on forms with a stamp and letterhead or with digital signatures, although the law permits verbal and e-mail applications. Information on controversial topics is often vague as well as of late.

In Gonta's opinion, the Law on Access to Information is often invoked—along with others—to limit or stall the provision of information to journalists. In 2018, for example, the media were excluded from learning who had filed declarations under the law on tax amnesty. Barbă recalled that in November, Parliament adopted a new code on the coverage of Parliament by journalists. The full impact remains to be seen, but provisions such as “disseminating MPs’ statements and speeches neutrally, objectively and... in line with socio-political balance,” raise concerns. Vasilica noted the appearance of new ways to restrict access to information for certain journalists. Jurnal TV and TV8 journalists have long been denied access to PDM weekly meetings. Now, government representatives are also refusing to participate in their talk shows. In addition, PDM leaders notified IPN that the governing party's representatives would not participate in the public debates the outlet has been holding for seven years.

It seems that the refusal to provide information to certain journalists and media outlets is a new and dangerous phenomenon for Moldovan society—one promoted by the governing party. Zaharia noted that officials only seem to restrict access to information that is truly valuable for the public or might portray the government in an unflattering light. Such behavior obviously obstructs the work of independent journalists and the public's right to information.

Gonta said that media have free access to foreign information sources despite some newly adopted provisions limiting access to certain television programs from countries that have not ratified the European Convention on Transfrontier

Television. Still, Burdeinii noted that since the Internet is unregulated, anyone, including journalists, can access local and international sources—or watch Russian television programs that are considered propaganda—online.

Savenco noted that Moldova does not prohibit anyone from practicing journalism based on gender, race, religion, etc., but Burdeinii and Barbă highlighted some undesirable consequences. For example, manipulative bloggers or trolls discredit the profession, while the transition to paid education has lowered standards. Vasilica feels that the freedom to practice journalism is often used to produce journalists who execute political orders instead of producing quality media, and it is one reason for the widespread corruption in the field. Gonta noted that journalists need accreditation to attend certain official events—a device used to block the access of some “undesirable” journalists to public events (such as the PDM's obstruction of TV8 and Jurnal TV, and *Ziarul de Garda* journalists shut out of the Orhei town festival). On the other hand, Publika TV was suspected/accused of privileged access to data following the Chisinau elections.

Gonta and Burdeinii emphasized the strong political influences on most media outlets; few can be categorized as independent, including investigative media. All this year's monitoring showed that television stations, for example, used manipulative techniques extensively in newscasts, and journalists portrayed obvious political partisanship. Among the manipulative techniques used were blurring (diminishing the importance of an event) and using priority information mainly to create confusion and to force less important issues on the public agenda, in order to distract attention from the issues that have real impact on public life and are of interest to the entire society. At the same time, the panelists noted that some media outlets intensified dissemination of confusing, incomplete, and false information. Also, some outlets interpreted events and quoted opinions expressed by some political entities at the expense of presenting information based on facts. Bzovaia feels that media reduced to propaganda are strongly developed in Moldova; they belong to the parties in power and enjoy privileges that let them forget about ethics.

Savenco and Darie said that most of the reports by the media are superficial and lack neutrality and objectivity. Dorosenco noted that in the Transnistrian region, the state-owned media and the media controlled by Sheriff Holding present only the official opinion of Tiraspol in covering Moldovan-Transnistrian relations. In Gagauz Yeri, some media outlets ignore important events that are organized by the owners of other outlets. Some politically affiliated media outlets also presented country progress reports or European parliamentary resolutions in a selective, manipulative manner. However, the transgressions led to the development of fact-checking platforms, such as Stop FALS! managed by the Association of Independent Press (AIP) and the IJC-managed Mediaticritica.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

2.26

In 2018, local elections took place in Moldova, including in the capital and Balti, the largest northern city. In addition, political struggles and partisanship kicked up ahead of the February 2019 parliamentary elections. The panelists see these as the main reasons for a drastic slip in the quality of journalism, explaining the dip in this year's Objective 2 score from 2.39 in last year's MSI study.

Journalism meets professional standards of quality.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS

- ▶ Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.
- ▶ Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- ▶ Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- ▶ Journalists cover key events and issues.
- ▶ Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.
- ▶ Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- ▶ Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- ▶ Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

Rusnac identified the issue of quality journalism as one of the most acute in the field. In Moldova, media controlled by political parties prevail. For example, broadcasters Prime, Canal 2, Canal 3, Publika, Vocea Basarabiei, and 10TV, as well as a large number of websites or blogs from Publika.md to Today.md or Mesager.md, are close to the PDM, which currently controls the parliamentary majority. The same situation is true for the stations NTV Moldova, Accent TV, Familia, TNT, and Exclusiv TV, which are grouped around President Igor Dodon and the PSRM. TV Centrala and Orhei TV are affiliated with Ilan Shor and the Sor political party. This list should also include Jurnal TV, which is affiliated with the opposition DA (Demnitare si Adevar/Dignity and Truth) Platform Party. The aforementioned media outlets practice a journalistic genre that might be called “party affiliated

journalism,” which places the interests of political parties over attempts to report objectively.

Vasilica distinguished “three parallel worlds” in Moldovan media. The first world consists of media outlets trying to be fair, but their efforts are diminished by frequent refusals to provide information, open or camouflaged, by decision makers. For example, in November and December 2018, the IPN agency could not obtain information and opinions requested from the NIA. As a result, the products of the first world are not always sufficiently balanced, even if they use phrases like “contacted... (the source required) or did not answer the phone to comment.” The second world consists of media outlets that openly and consciously manipulate and falsify. As a rule, they are politically affiliated. The third world shows itself when the methods of the second world infiltrate the first world by placing fake, manipulative, denigrating material for pay. The aim is to provide credibility to fake messages by using first-world media. Zaharia was of the opinion that well-documented reports and information are verified and balanced only by independent media, which, by some estimates, represent about 15 percent of the outlets in Moldova. The rest serve the governing forces or political parties, not the public interest.

The country has had a journalists’ code of conduct since 1999, and it has been signed by more than 50 media outlets. However, according to Savenco, not all journalists—even those who signed it—adhere to it. Some media outlets have their own codes of conduct but still commit violations, especially by producing and disseminating reports containing covert advertising, which the Law on Advertising and the Broadcasting Code prohibit. Vasilica and Gonta noted that the ethical standards assumed by the media are in line with international standards, but they are quite often violated—that is

why they do not produce the expected effects in the media and in Moldovan society. In 2018, there were serious violations of professional ethics, especially in the coverage of sensitive topics involving minors. Burdeinii regretted that, for example, bloggers do not commit to journalists’ standards but still claim that they practice journalism.

Bzovaia observed that professional principles often suffer when larger salaries and special circumstances are at stake, noting that journalists commonly hop from one outlet to another. She cited as examples the two television stations working in Balti. The first, BTV, is close to the city’s leadership; it covers the work of the mayor’s office in a mostly positive manner. The second, TV Nord, covertly promotes the interests of the PDM and criticizes local public authorities. TV Nord was launched in 2018 and lured the majority of its employees away from BTV. The next day, they started saying on screen the very things they used to deny on their former screen. As a result, Bzovaia highlighted that quality journalism is usually promoted and developed from grant financing; among the major donors for this are: USAID, US Embassy in Moldova, and the European Union.

Dorosenco said there is a code of conduct in the Transnistrian region developed by the Union of Journalists of Transnistria, but not all journalists are aware of it. The division and polarization of the media, the political class, and civil society—along with the lack of economic protections—prevent journalists from uniting to promote fair, objective, and unbiased journalism.

Mosneag recalled cases when politically affiliated media criticized for violating professional standards used the media to launch attacks and seed suspicion against those who demanded respect for journalistic ethics. Rusnac cited a recent example: the manner in which the

media affiliated with the governing forces covered the adoption by the European Parliament of a resolution on the implementation of the Association Agreement with Moldova. The media close to the PDM tried to discredit this resolution, which was critical toward the Government of Moldova, and to question the integrity of the author of the report, MEP Petras Austrevicius. Zaharia said that the standards of professional ethics are respected only by independent media outlets that value their reputations and serve the public interest.

Ribca feels that given the political and economic control over the media, the majority of journalists who want decent salaries succumb to self-censorship. Journalists who work in outlets that belong to or are affiliated with politicians resort to self-censorship because they know that if they veer from the accepted “editorial policy,” dictated by the owners, they risk being fired. Mosneag revealed that in unofficial discussions with journalists employed at political media outlets, the journalists admit that they practice self-censorship to keep their jobs. Vasilica believed that censorship and self-censorship are omnipresent, although the motivations differ: for some, they are financial, while for others, they are political. Small exceptions are media outlets with foreign funding and with strong political coverage, such as Radio Free Europe in Moldova. Zaharia believed that self-censorship is mainly manifested in journalists’ conscious neglect of facts and opinions that they know editors will reject.

In general, the media cover the most important events in the country and globally, Gonta said, but not always in compliance with professional standards. Savenco agreed and noted the tendency to cover the most important issues—such as unemployment, poverty, and corruption—differently, sometimes allowing less or more airtime depending on the station’s political affiliation. To diminish the

importance of national events, they may deliver news from other countries that is of no informational importance to the Moldovan public. Darie noted that government-affiliated media often ignore events organized by the opposition. Instead, these outlets generate and broadly disseminate topics published on dubious websites (e.g., blogger Andrei Bolocan’s alleged arrest by the Canadian police for pedophilia or the leader of the opposition party DA allegedly wanting “to rent Chisinau” to the sheikh of the United Arab Emirates).

Bzovaia feels that media reduced to propaganda are strongly developed in Moldova; they belong to the parties in power and enjoy privileges that let them forget about ethics.

In the Transnistrian region, Dorosenco noted a haphazard approach to issues such as human rights or the lives of ethnic minorities. Some activities or problematic situations involving the authorities are discussed on social networks but avoided in other media. Vasilica noted a diametrically different way of approaching issues—such as embezzlement, corruption, independence of the judiciary, and invalidation of local elections in Chisinau, among others—depending on the media’s political affiliation. In Zaharia’s opinion, only independent media properly cover relevant events in the country and globally. As an example, government-affiliated media covered the massive antigovernment protests in Bucharest in early 2018 briefly and only after great delay, seemingly out of a desire to protect the image of the Social-Democratic Party, which is in power in Romania and is an international partner of the Moldovan government.

All experts agreed that the salaries of journalists in Moldova differ dramatically. Smaller salaries at independent outlets increase the risk that some journalists will jump to better-paying posts in political media outlets. In politically affiliated outlets, salaries are several times higher, including at recently launched television stations. An example is TV Centrala, with close ties to Shor. It used high salaries to lure experienced journalists, including some from public television Moldova 1 and TVR Moldova, who could not resist the temptation. Zaharia noted that the salaries of independent journalists are usually between €200–400 (\$230–\$450), which discourages young journalists from properly practicing their profession when the media holdings managed by politicians offer salaries starting at €500 (\$570) per month. Salaries, however, are not the only reason journalists move around. For example, the IPN News Agency, with considerable effort, offers salaries to qualified journalists that are above the average in the field (between MDL 9,000 and 12,000 per month nontaxable or about \$520–\$700), but they, nevertheless, face ongoing staff shortages. Furthermore, independent journalists sometimes cannot get their wages on time (e.g., those from TV8), and they have to work several jobs to cope. This, Dorosenco noted, affects the quality of journalism. Barbă confirmed that to be able to keep your independence, you have to work for foreign media outlets and do other work, such as being an expert or trainer.

There are few quality domestic entertainment programs in Moldova, which Barbă attributes to high production costs—limiting the chance entertainment could surpass news. Gonta disagreed, noting that although newscasts maintain a significant place in broadcast schedules—after the amendments to the Broadcasting Code regarding the share of domestic products and the limitations on access

to retransmitted informative, analytical, political, or military programs—the volume of entertainment products, both domestic and foreign, has increased, although they are low quality. Darie feels that the volume of news and entertainment is balanced—but that entertainment, for the most part, is imported from Russia or Romania. Vasilica agreed that Moldovan society is strongly anchored to and influenced by foreign entertainment programs, mostly Russian, that capitalize on and encourage linguistic, historical, and cultural affinities. Russian programs are virtually free, in contrast to less accessible Western programs. Along with entertainment programs retransmitted from Russia, audiences also consume large doses of Russian propaganda on issues such as the superiority of Russian cuisine over American cuisine or the strength of the education system in Russia. On the other hand, the manipulative nature of some domestic newscasts has even stronger negative effects. Zaharia mentioned appreciation for the qualitative analytical and investigative programs the Moldovan media offer.

Overall, the media's technological infrastructure is at an acceptable level. Burdeinii noted that independent media use less expensive equipment, but this fact does not decisively influence the quality of journalism. Darie agreed, especially as new technologies allow low-cost outlets to make live broadcasts and to edit content. Poor quality mainly comes from poor training, professional laziness, and censorship and self-censorship rather than a lack of equipment. Some panelists noted the chronic lack of high-performance equipment at public broadcasters; Barbă confirmed that while private television and radio stations are technically well equipped, Teleradio-Moldova lags. Despite adopting a new broadcasting system in 2018 that provides high definition (HD) or full HD footage,

Teleradio-Moldova has to ensure the production of about 40 television projects with 10 field cameras. Editing-room computers and software are obsolete. The funding system offers little hope for improving the technological infrastructure of Teleradio-Moldova—particularly its television section. The regional public broadcaster Teleradio-Gagauzia purchased advanced equipment in 2018—but given the pace of information technology development, such equipment should be upgraded on an ongoing basis. Savenco believed that the issue is acute in the case of independent media outlets that are just getting started and find it difficult to obtain funds for technical equipment. Dorosenco noted that while state-owned media in Tiraspol have no problems, the few small independent media outlets face difficulties, especially with renting facilities due to lack of funds or unwillingness of landlords to risk problems with state authorities by renting to independent media. Vasilica highlighted shortages of equipment and material in producing and disseminating information by independent media, which leads to unfair competition with politically affiliated media. Zaharia feels that local/regional private broadcasters face the biggest difficulties in this area.

Moldova does produce some quality investigative journalism, although it is rare and mostly offered by print and online media outlets. Zaharia cited investigations in audio and video format, in-depth economic analyses, and professionally produced news. The few independent television stations rarely conduct investigations, while those controlled by the governing forces are not interested in them. Politicians order the few investigations they conduct, Vasilica said. One such well-resourced investigation concerned the Open Dialog Foundation; the motive was manipulation of public opinion before parliamentary elections, through presenting opposition leaders Andrei Nastase and

Maia Sandu in a negative light. Barbă mentioned the appearance in 2018 in some media of so-called investigations based on statements or misinterpretations of facts or data found on dubious sites or blogs. Such false investigations are used to denigrate certain individuals or institutions. The experts emphasized that investigative journalism is largely possible through grants from foreign donors. Dorosenco confirmed that while in the Transnistrian region the media do not practice investigative journalism, the institution she represents did some limited investigative work in cooperation with *RISE Moldova*.

Public broadcasters rarely carry out journalistic investigations; instead, they prefer to have specialized programs—for example, on health, education, or culture. Burdeinii believes that there is specialized journalistic material of good quality, but society fails to appreciate it properly. There are also outlets that specialize in certain fields, Savenco said. Some examples are the portals Sanatate.info and Bizlaw.md (justice), and the economic portal Mold-Street.md.

Darie thinks it is too early to talk about long-term quality investigative journalism, but at the same time, he noted a dilemma at his outlet: They often discuss the balance between quality material and "light" material. For example, an online article about a local personality who gets a divorce (written in a maximum of five minutes) may draw 10–20 times more views than a quality piece about how the government manages public resources inefficiently. It is difficult to motivate reporters and outlet managers to focus on quality material when profits are linked to the number of views.

**OBJECTIVE 3:
PLURALITY
OF NEWS**
2.59

Multitudes of media operate in Moldova—117 radio and television stations alone, according to the BCC. However, most do not cover a variety of views. As the pluralism of opinions has not improved despite the diversity, the score for this objective slipped slightly from its score of 2.63 in the 2018 MSI. Citizens wanting to be well informed must consult several sources. An example is the rally organized in autumn in Chisinau by the PDM. The media affiliated with this party reported that 100,000 people attended the event, while the police and independent experts counted fewer participants. Consumers could verify the information, Savenco said, if they wanted to, especially through the internet. As a rule, young people prefer to get information from social networks, but they are not the most credible sources. Still, increased access to the internet and social networks facilitates the verification of information, but the authorities' regular announcements of their intent to regulate this area raise concerns, Vasilica added.

Gonta is convinced that a multitude of media sources does not directly lead to better information for citizens. Most have access to several national television stations, but they basically deliver the same information, not necessarily of good quality. Furthermore, despite the variety of options, most people rely on one television station. Therefore, Barbă said, media consumers should adopt a critical approach to avoid being misled. Rusnac and Mosneag consider control by political groups that relentlessly promote their points of view as Moldovan media's biggest problem. According to

monitoring carried out by the IJC, seven out of 10 television stations failed to cover Chisinau's mayoral election fairly and impartially. They engaged in political partisanship, did not give equal access to all the candidates registered, and ensured neither a pluralism of opinions nor a balance of sources. In the Transnistrian region, Dorosenco said, state-owned media prevail. The situation with private media, controlled by the Sheriff Holding Company (which is also the region's main service provider), is similar. Estimates from the Transnistrian Media Center put the share of pro-government media in Transnistria at about 90 percent.

The law does not restrict citizens' access to national or international sources of information; however, as the vast majority of the population in the country knows only one foreign language—Russian—Vasilica said that amounts to an indirect restriction on international media. At the same time, there are urban-rural disparities in access to information. No radio or television stations reach about a third of the country's rural areas, and temporary power cuts owing to bad weather or planned repairs of power lines sometimes block access to electronic media. Several panelists mentioned restrictions on access to certain programs retransmitted in Moldova from countries that have not ratified the European Convention on Transfrontier Television, although they can easily be accessed online. According to Barbă, the authorities should prohibit these programs, not by means of legislative amendments but through court decisions based on the monitoring carried out by the BCC and/or by the nongovernmental sector.

Gonta noted that in Moldova, the rate of general illiteracy is low and, therefore, not a real obstacle to accessing media. Media literacy, on the other hand, has continuously developed, though at the initiative of the civil society and not of the authorities. In 2018, the government developed

and approved a media education curriculum for secondary schools in cooperation with the IJC, giving some students access to an optional course in media literacy education. At the same time, the panelists believe that to establish immunity to propaganda and misinformation, media literacy should be a compulsory discipline, not an optional one. In the Transnistrian region, Dorosenco noted that citizens' access to information sources is unrestricted; however, Moldovan periodicals, for example, are not marketed.

Public media are still funded by the state, providing a lever to influence their editorial policy. On that point, Gonta observed that the national public television regressed in terms of impartiality and fairness in news coverage in 2018. Monitoring repeatedly showed that TV Moldova 1 transformed itself into a mouthpiece for the central authorities. Darie agreed that public media betrayed signs of political influence, but Rusnac said that during the campaign for local elections, Moldova 1, along with private stations Pro TV and TV8, acted in a balanced manner. The public broadcaster also airs educational and cultural programs that the private media ignore (such as shows in minority languages and children's programs).

Burdeinii believes that public media often revert to self-censorship. In Gagauz Yeri, the regional public broadcaster is subject to greater control by the authorities than private outlets. Savenco recalled instances of public station reports that were identical to those of a politically affiliated station (Canal 2). Mosneag said that in July 2018, Maia Sandu, leader of the Action and Solidarity Party, accused the public television station of not offering airspace to opposition parties. The next month, opposition parties organized a protest at the station's headquarters, accusing its leadership of restricting access for the opposition and of manipulating public

opinion. After several meetings with opposition representatives, Barbă said Moldova 1 launched a new weekly program, “The Red Button,” and invited members of opposition parties and independent experts to participate. As for the regional public broadcaster, Gagauz Radio-Television (GRT) remains dependent on the Gagauz authorities. Overall, Zaharia said, public broadcasters mostly cover the position and vision of the authorities; criticism of the authorities is rare. In Transnistria, the state-owned media are financed from the official budget and report almost exclusively on the activities of state institutions. The absolute majority of the media is in the Russian language. There are several periodicals with small circulations and some programs in the languages of ethnic minorities (in Romanian written in Cyrillic and in Ukrainian).

There are 10 independent news agencies in Moldova; however, according to Savenco, few media outlets use their services on a contractual basis—relying instead on news lifted from the internet. Burdeinii agreed, saying that few outlets can afford to pay for news streams from Reuters, Agence France-Presse (AFP), or other international agencies. Darie and Gonta noted that Moldova has good news agencies—several generalist news agencies (including one state-owned agency) as well as some specialized agencies (economy, youth, etc.)—but they remain underused. There is a paradox, Barbă observed: Moldovan news agencies are more independent than other media and have subscribers among embassies, foreign companies, financial groups, and some media outlets. They offer many services, including press conference rooms, production and distribution of press releases, and coverage of media events. At the same time, the media usually bypass them. Vasilica noted that this is partially because a large amount of information is now widely available and free online (although a lot

of it is not trustworthy). The other reason, though, is that the politically affiliated outlets do not require fair and balanced outlet products. Taken together, these reasons contribute to the decline of independent news agencies.

Moldovan media outlets produce their own news; for broadcasters, it is a legal obligation. At the same time, most panelists questioned the quality. Burdeinii noted that reporters often “follow” the news made by others. Darie added that most of the news covers the same events—as a rule, those happening in the capital—while rural issues get scant coverage. In independent media, Savenco believed, news reports are usually unbiased and objective, and there are newscasts of generalist or niche natures. If the media are politically affiliated, newscasts reveal the inclinations of the political owner. Gonta said that studies and monitoring surveys have shown that four national television stations with the same owner deliver nearly identical content.

Gonta is convinced that a multitude of media sources does not directly lead to better information for citizens. Most have access to several national television stations, but they basically deliver the same information, not necessarily of good quality.

In Moldova, the transparency of media ownership is relative. Ribca was convinced that the legal obligation to publicize the owners of broadcasting outlets did not lead to the expected results. Several panelists mentioned that motivated people could easily bypass legal provisions and create trusts that generate media concentration.

Gonta noted that in 2018, the existing media trusts strengthened their positions, and one more trust appeared at the end of the year in Shor’s outlet. Savenco and Burdeinii believed that, at least in broadcasting, anyone who wants to know about the owners can find that out since such data are public. However, the usefulness of such knowledge is uncertain, as Barbă clarified: While de jure some owners have ceded their licenses, de facto those ceded licenses have remained in the same controlling hands. Zaharia was even more categorical: The public remains in the dark over how television stations close to politicians are funded. For example, in relation to particularly large instances of money laundering, the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor’s Office is currently investigating the transfer from the accounts of a company registered in the Bahamas of €1.5 million (\$1.7 million) to Exclusiv Media, the owner of television station NTV Moldova. The company’s manager admitted that part of this money was invested in the launch of the station in 2016 after *RISE Moldova* investigative journalists discovered the transaction. While there is some ownership transparency in broadcasting, the situation is worse with online media. Rusnac said many news websites disseminate the same information as the media affiliated with the ruling power and provide no details of their founders and teams. Some websites do not even display a phone number in their contact section, only an e-mail address. The panelists agreed that there is no foreign investment in Moldovan media.

There are all types of media in Moldova, including offerings designed for ethnic minorities, but everything depends on their funding, Burdeinii suggested. Traditionally, the national public broadcaster delivers shows in minority languages, accessible to all citizens, and the regional public broadcaster focuses primarily on the region’s

minorities. Darie reported an acute problem: Ethnic minorities continue to prefer media products in Russian. On the one hand, it increases the volume of journalistic products in Russian at the expense of those in Romanian, and on the other hand, it undercuts the development of media in the languages of ethnic minorities. Vasilica added that the reason minorities mostly seek information in Russian is that they do not know the Romanian language sufficiently. Another issue is the politicization and ongoing emphasis on the differences between social groups, including minority groups. Savenco highlighted another issue: The media only occasionally deliver articles on sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender equality, etc. No one opposes the appearance of these items; the opposition, rather, comes from journalists who prefer to write on topics that bring more viewership or increase audience size.

In 2018, Moldovan media continued with unbalanced coverage of local, national, and international events. Barbă found, however, a slight improvement, as the media began giving more space to local news. The probable reason is the decline in the credibility of the representatives of the political class; too often, the news focuses more on the government's political agenda than the public agenda. Savenco noted that national media increasingly take on local topics reported by bloggers or by representatives of citizen journalism. Still, Gonta believed that since about 60 percent of media outlets are concentrated in the capital city, their coverage of local/regional events remains in the shadows. The national public broadcaster does not excel at this either, but in a way, some thematic programs compensate for the lack of news from the regions. There is enough international news, but Burdeinii said it is presented from the perspective of foreign sources, as Moldovan media

do not post correspondents abroad. Darie recalled that a network of rural websites was created in 2018 as part of a start-up project to encourage local news development. Still, Vasilica said there is a serious information gap, because the media with national reach do not provide enough local coverage, and the local media fall short on national coverage.

Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS

- ▶ A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- ▶ Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- ▶ Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- ▶ Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- ▶ A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.
- ▶ State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- ▶ Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- ▶ Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics are reliable.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

1.77

Media in Moldova are not financially sustainable businesses for many reasons, including the monopolization of the advertising market—which is quite small to begin with. Online media have a greater chance at economic independence, as they do not need to spend anything on newsprint or on broadcasting equipment, Burdeinii noted. However, Moldova's online media are unregulated—in many cases not even registered—so it is difficult or impossible to judge their efficiency as businesses, Savenco pointed out. On the other hand, some online media outlets are registered as LLCs or NGOs, secure grants and commercial advertising, and have development strategies and business plans. The media outlets that are officially registered employ accountants, financial directors, information technology managers, and lawyers, as well as journalists—but that structure is not the norm. According to Mosneag, most media outlets have no long-term business plans and cannot afford to hire a lot of auxiliary staff to handle marketing, human resources, or business details. In most cases, journalists manage newspapers and websites, along with their editorial work.

Bzovaia said that only the politically affiliated outlets are economically secure. Darie highlighted two major issues: poor managerial capacity and constraints in the advertising market. Barbă agreed that there are not enough good managers in media outlets, but she pointed to a positive trend: Several outlets (TV8, Jurnal TV, and Agora.md) launched crowdfunding campaigns to keep their editorial policies independent. Ribca recalled the case when

four television stations exposed an alleged cartel agreement between two advertising sales houses to the Competition Council⁵ and mentioned the attempt to increase the price of newsprint by nearly 25 percent⁶, reflecting attempts to damage potential revenue for the media and to increase operating costs. Rusnac added that the advertising market is insufficiently regulated, and the existing regulations do not work or are discretionary, making it extremely difficult for media outlets to obtain economic independence. As a rule, media owners continue to treat their outlets not as businesses but as tools to promote personal interests. The outlets that can claim economic independence are usually funded by foreign projects or with direct financial support from other countries, such as Russia (Sputnik), Romania (TVR, Radio Chisinau), or the United States (Radio Free Europe).

Vasilica outlined several points of vulnerability, starting with insufficiently trained media managers and specialists in accounting, marketing, and promotion. The independent media's excessive dependence on foreign grants, the lack of affordability of media products for both the end consumer and independent media, and the lack of political will to create normal working conditions for the media are other vulnerabilities. For example, in early 2018, the rent for government-managed premises shot up by 30 percent. Zaharia mentioned regrettable cases

of outlets sacrificing their editorial independence and credibility by accepting money from politicians. In Gagauz Yeri, the regional public broadcaster is insufficiently funded by the state budget and seems to lack a strong approach to developing business plans or attracting funds to strengthen its financial and editorial independence. Dorosenco could provide just one example of a financially sustainable media outlet in Transnistria: the private *Dobry Den*. The panelists also mentioned that *Profsoyuznie Vesti* was closed in 2018; however, while the ruling was amended to lend legal oxygen to the act, the newspaper's editor believes the motive was political.

Rusnac believes that stations that criticize the governing forces, such as Jurnal TV or TV8, receive far less commercial advertising than the government-affiliated stations.

Media without foreign or political support face a constant battle for survival. Bzovaia listed their main income sources: subscriptions, print copy sales through kiosks or retailers, and commercial advertising. The distribution of publications by the monopoly Post of Moldova is very flawed. The number of kiosks in the city has diminished drastically, and they have vanished from villages. Other income sources include printing services, payment for cable or satellite television services, and support from owners. The precarious economic situation has led to the phenomenon of custom-made publications that often amount to propaganda or manipulation, Burdeinii commented. Savenco said that some media outlets are forced to carry out fundraising. In 2018, at least two television stations launched crowdfunding campaigns, Vasilica said, but their results were disappointing.

As much of the independent media's revenue

comes from foreign donors—a reality unlikely to change unless the Moldovan economy improves—Darie called for greater transparency and publicizing of funding. Gonta pointed out that even the national public broadcaster has only 60 percent of the funds it needs—and, given that its financial independence is not ensured, interventions in editorial policy cannot be excluded. Barbă pointed out that the national legislation does not require transparent reporting of media's income sources, making it difficult to assess their independence.

Mosneag noted that the advertising market is concentrated in the hands of businessmen and politicians who also control the most important television stations. The company Casa Media—part of the holding belonging to Plahotniuc—still dominates the advertising market, managing more than 60 percent of advertising contracts and offering preferential advertising deals to the holding's broadcasters. Politically independent advertising companies usually collaborate with media outlets, set advertising prices, and, in some cases, contracts may be negotiated individually. In 2018, another sales outlet, Exclusive Sales House, established itself in the media market, selling advertising for PSRM stations. Rusnac believes that stations that criticize the governing forces, such as Jurnal TV or TV8, receive far less commercial advertising than the government-affiliated stations. In the Transnistrian region, Dorosenco noted, independent media have no alternative to external grants—but they are not enough.

Vasilica explained that some businesses avoid placing advertising in independent media outlets, as they fear direct or indirect repercussions such as unexpected inspections from tax authorities. Burdeinii said that advertising agencies have not been able to influence the situation for the better. The pro-government media have monopolized

5 "Four TV Stations Denounce to the Competition Council an Alleged Cartel Agreement between Two Sales Houses," Media AZI. January 24, 2018. <http://media-azi.md/ro/stiri/patru-posturi-tv-denun%C8%9B%C4%83-la-consiliul-concuren%C8%9B-e-o-presupus%C4%83-%C3%AEEn%C8%9Belegere-de-cartel-%C3%AEentre-dou%C4%83>.

6 "Public Call: Increasing Paper Prices Could Lead Newspapers to Bankruptcy," Media AZI. June 19, 2018. <http://media-azi.md/ro/stiri/apel-public-majorarea-pre%C8%9Bului-la-h%C3%A2rtie-ar-putea-duce-ziarele-la-faliment>.

the commercial advertising market. Moreover, advertising agencies often turn into public relations companies that promote customers' interests. Gonta and Savenco agreed that the placement of commercial advertising is strongly influenced by the media's political affiliations. Rusnac regretted that the new advertising law was not adopted in 2018, although the IJC had developed it by back in April 2017.

Independent media are well-managed businesses, allowing editorial independence.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS

- ▶ Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- ▶ Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- ▶ Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- ▶ Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.
- ▶ Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- ▶ Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- ▶ Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

Bzovaia and Darie highlighted another threat to traditional media: the development of online advertising. While local and regional media have barely grasped the skills to sell online ads, Google and Facebook are becoming increasingly efficient in advertising by providing audience targeting based on demographic criteria. Thus, Google or Facebook

benefit from the growth of the advertising market, not Moldova's online media. In the Transnistrian region, Dorosenco said that what little commercial advertising there is goes to the television stations controlled by the authorities.

Media in Moldova cannot rely on advertising revenue, and the advertising market is too small for the large number of media outlets in the country. Vasilica believes that the share of advertising revenue is much higher at politically affiliated media outlets. Savenco agreed, noting that sales houses controlled by government representatives largely manage advertising placement. Barbă is convinced that no influential media outlet in the country could cover even a third of its revenue from advertising. Burdeinii said that for now, most commercial advertising budgets go to television; other types of media are practically excluded. Bzovaia confirmed this and added that advertising agencies are not interested in cooperating with local and regional media; the big budgets and the big audience are in the capital city. This is one more reason why media in places like Gagauz Yeri rely on paid personal advertisements or congratulatory messages on special occasions.

With a few exceptions, Moldova does not offer public subsidies for the media, yet Gonta feels that the government still influences media content—at least the national broadcasters. Even the public, taxpayer-funded broadcaster increasingly reflects government influence. Vasilica noted that the government provides subsidies and benefits to media products intended for children, although this is a narrow and non-influential segment. Darie pointed out that even the few state subsidies granted to the media are given in the absence of regulations that would ensure their fair distribution. Barbă noted that unlike in other countries, state institutions are not large providers of commercial

advertising revenue in Moldova. That is why the media are constantly looking for resources, especially in the advertising market, and do not expect help from the state. Ribca believes the media also lack trust in the government—which, for example, promised, but did not deliver, set-top boxes for vulnerable families to ease the transition to digital terrestrial television.⁷

Media market studies are rarely conducted in Moldova, although audience studies and media information perception studies are done occasionally—usually at the demand of, and funded by, civil society, according to Savenco. Similarly, in Gagauz Yeri, market surveys are conducted sporadically and only by civil society organizations. Burdeinii said only large broadcasters can afford regular audience measurement or market studies. Because of excessive tariffs for marketing and audience measurement services, Bzovaia said local/regional media carry out public preference studies themselves. Barbă thinks market studies are not of much use, as they basically target national broadcasting. Local/regional broadcasters cannot afford such luxuries. Vasilica said he does not know of independent media outlets that do market studies. There are several reasons, including lack of funds or lack of specialists and skills. Politically affiliated media probably do carry out such studies, but they do not share their results, as their owners, not public opinion, set their agendas. The situation is better for online media, Darie said, as the Gemius study (BATI – Audit Bureau of Circulations and Internet) provides useful demographics for websites. Dorosenco noted

⁷ "The Government Is Again Promising Free-of-Charge Digital Devices for Receiving Digital Signals," Media AZI. February 6, 2018. <http://media-azi.md/ro/stiri/guvernul-promite-din-nou-familiiilor-defavorizate-dispozitive-gratuite-pentru-recep%C8%9Bionarea>.

that in the Transnistrian region, only state-owned media can afford market studies, but such studies are not made public.

In Moldova, the BATI and the AGB Moldova Agency have measured the audiences of 16 television stations and of several radio stations for many years. In 2018, the BCC approved a regulation on the procedure and the full composition of the commission to select the company that will measure television audience ratings. Vasilica noted that these BCC actions occurred against the background of long-standing suspicions that television audience data are not credible and are allegedly produced on demand. Barbă recalled that not all newspapers and not all online media are members of BATI and that AGB Moldova services are too expensive for small radio/television stations. Bzovaia agreed, noting that in addition to BATI, the Gemius Company also works in this segment, but only their subscribers have access to their data. However, there are also free online measurement tools that allow outlets to track their own analytics and compare their standing to competing outlets. Mosneag added that media outlets analyze their audiences in part using public tools, such as Google Analytics, but if they want the print run and audience to be calculated by a specialized outlet, then they turn to BATI. Not all media outlets can pay the annual fee, but if they are not BATI members, they are virtually isolated from advertisers. In 2018, with foreign donors' support, several independent media outlets, including *RISE Moldova* and *Ziarul de Garda*, entered the BATI studies. Burdeinii pointed out a shortcoming, though, as the BATI system does measure mobile device users.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

2.40

Despite the lack of any restrictions in Moldova limiting the creation of associations within the media community, this area has been slow to evolve.

Barbă highlighted two associations, the Cable Providers Association of Moldova and the National Broadcasting Employers Association of Moldova. While the former periodically publicizes positions on certain issues, little is known about the activities of the latter. Rusnac pointed to two others—the Broadcasters Association and the AICI Network (a regional TV association)—but agreed that the associations intended to advance the professional interests of independent media and to promote quality journalism are not very visible.

A handful of active media NGOs step in to play the role of these associations in Moldova. Media NGOs (such as Independent Journalism Center, Association of Independent Press, and Association of Electronic Press) lobby for and defend journalists' and publishers' rights, but they are not media trade unions or employers' associations, Zaharia pointed out. There is no association or trade union working on a membership basis, as in other countries. Noting the lack of associations necessary for a healthy media community, including an association of publishers, Vasilica explained how Moldova's media structure is to blame. The reason, he said, is that a considerable number of media owners hold interests outside of the media that their media outlets are intended to promote—not the interests of independent media.

There are associations of journalists focused on specialty topics, such as business and sports

as well, but they do not focus on defending the rights of their members, Barbă and Darie said. Only the AIP works as a consolidated network to uphold the rights of journalists. All of the panelists mentioned that there is no true trade union of journalists, although the need for one has long been discussed—especially since there are no legal barriers to establishing such organizations.

Burdeinii agreed that there are several associations of journalists (including, Association of Environment Journalists, Association of Economic Journalists, and Association of Sport Media), but said they act disparately. He expressed regret for the lack of joint efforts, especially in situations where a common front is needed to defend the rights of journalists. Zaharia also believes that media associations should collaborate more, both to promote higher quality journalism and to oppose the authorities when they try to obstruct journalists. Gonta and Vasilica were, however, skeptical that more joint efforts are possible in Moldova given the outside role played by media owners.

The Transnistrian region has a trade union for journalists, Dorosenco said, but it does not work to defend their rights. There is also the Union of Journalists of Transnistria, an NGO that serves as an association of journalists, but it does not maintain a website, and it has not established relations with other NGOs. Instead, it maintains close ties with state structures. In Gagauz Yeri, the regional public broadcaster also has a trade union, but it has failed to solve the problems of journalists, which were numerous in 2018.

All the experts expressed appreciation for the work of media NGOs (such as Independent Journalism Center, Association of Independent Press, and Association of Electronic Press). Savenco said that although these NGOs are concentrated in the capital, they collaborate with all willing journalists.

Gonta noted that these NGOs reacted to press freedom violations (in 2018, there were nearly 40 such statements). Joint statements by NGOs responding to such violations raise public awareness and create an environment of solidarity, at least among some media outlets, Barbă said. NGO participation in 2018 in the parliamentary Working Group on Improving Media Legislation stood out as particularly visible and efficient; it managed to get a Code of Audiovisual Media Services approved.

Barbă and Mosneag noted that although more than 100 graduates obtain journalism diplomas every year, few meet the expectations of employers and are ready to be journalists, so there is an acute shortage of good employees.

Media NGOs also support educational programs for journalists, Rusnac confirmed. These include courses in Moldova and programs abroad, such as the European Scholarships for Journalists.⁸ Also, the IJC implements media education programs to help primary, middle, and high school students understand the role of the media in a democratic society, identify propaganda, and use social networks responsibly. The AIP also develops media education programs aimed at helping rural media consumers distinguish objective news from manipulative information.

Bzovaia said that her outlet has won several court cases (initiated by the protagonists of

journalistic investigations who sought moral and material damages) with the free legal support of the IJC. The Media Center in Tiraspol offers free legal aid to journalists, too, but Dorosenco said no journalist requested such support in 2018. Zaharia highlighted the cooperation of media NGOs with those specializing in combating corruption, promoting justice, and other fields to enhance the promotion of transparency, access to information, and press freedom. Vasilica added that there are strong, active NGOs with recognized expertise, including at the international level. However, such NGOs—for example, Media Forum 2018—are respected by independent media but ignored by the employees of political media and carry little influence with the authorities, thus limiting their reach.

According to the experts, there are enough public and private institutions in Moldova that train journalists. The problem, however, is still the quality of professional training, Burdeinii noted. Eventually, journalists build the necessary skills on the job and, importantly, at national and international training programs. Access to such training is not restricted, so it presents a major opportunity for those interested in professional growth. Darie praised the quality of the IJC-managed School of Advanced Journalism, but he feels that more intense international exchanges are needed. Barbă and Mosneag noted that although more than 100 graduates obtain journalism diplomas every year, few meet the expectations of employers and are ready to be journalists, so there is an acute shortage of good employees.

The quality of graduates has always been controversial, Gonta said, suggesting the need for changes in the curricula in relevant educational institutions. Neither traditional theory-based teaching nor practical training produces the desired results. If appropriate conditions are not created

in the country, more Moldovan students will seek journalism diplomas abroad—especially in Romania, which grants numerous scholarships to young people from Moldova each year. Savenco noted that many of those who obtain journalism diplomas abroad do not return and highlighted a serious problem: There are no educational institutions to prepare media managers. Vasilica noted the indirect connection between theoretical knowledge and practical skills, which is left up to students. He suggested formalizing the relationship between the two, perhaps by securing funds to encourage media businesses to take over the practical aspect of educating young journalists.

Supporting institutions function in the professional interests of independent media.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- ▶ Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
- ▶ Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.
- ▶ Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- ▶ Sources of newsprint NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- ▶ Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- ▶ Printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- ▶ Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- ▶ Information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens.

⁸ "The 'European Scholarships for Journalists' Program, 2018–2019 edition, Was Launched," Civid.MD. August 29, 2018. <http://www.civic.md/burse/43678-a-fost-lansat-programul-bursele-europene-pentru-jurnalisti-editia-2018-2019.html>.

In Gagauz Yeri, year after year, there is a shortage of well-trained staff at the regional public broadcaster. The problem can be explained partly by the requirement that employees know the Gagauz language and partly because of the tendency of journalism graduates to accept jobs with private media outlets that offer better pay.

Various courses, seminars, study visits, etc., are organized for Moldovan journalists. In 2018, the IJC alone conducted nearly 20 training sessions and workshops on various themes. As a rule, participation is free, Savenco said. Bzovaia noted that media NGOs, not the authorities, are taking care of training journalists. Gonta mentioned a media-needs study was conducted in 2017 that pointed to the need for journalists to receive periodic training to grow professionally, and that in 2018, with the support of the Council of Europe and the EU, a continuing education center was opened at Teleradio-Moldova. Barbă hoped that the center would in time expand its activities and offer training to all those interested. Short-term courses, Burdeinii believed, often offer journalists more practical skills than they get in formal education institutions. Vasilica noted that the training organized by media NGOs is high quality and involves national and international experts, but independent media outlets that frequently have few human resources cannot always afford to send an employee to training for more than a half-day, although they are aware of the necessity and usefulness of training in this age of rapid changes in the profession. In the past three to four years, journalists have had access to a rich variety of training opportunities and short-term courses, Zaharia noted, and media managers can also benefit from offline and online thematic training through webinars or consultations offered, for example, by the Mediaforum.md platform. Nevertheless, some journalists, especially those

employed in politically affiliated media, have little opportunity to apply the new knowledge they gain.

In Moldova, access to media equipment and printing houses is free, but the panelists agreed that the situation for periodicals is becoming more difficult. The lack of a paper industry, Burdeinii pointed out, imposes great costs on the print media. In 2018, Mosneag said newspapers took a heavy blow from paper suppliers who increased prices mid-year. When the most important companies importing newsprint, mainly from the Russian Federation, increased their prices from €620–650 (\$700–\$735) per ton to €770 (\$870) per ton, the AIP launched a public appeal to Parliament and the government requesting urgent steps, including the creation of a fund to support periodicals of social importance. Subsequently, the Competition Council initiated an investigation, but its results were not announced. Vasilica said that the conflict between periodicals and print and distribution providers is long-lasting and damaging to the quality of print media—and it could be solved with help from the authorities, but they are currently avoiding involvement.

In Gagauz Yeri, as there are virtually no print periodicals left, the problem of newsprint supply is not felt. However, the issue of including the regional public broadcaster in the channel offerings of service distributors (cable companies) remains. Most of the population has access to cable television but does not have a way to watch public television.

Moldovan citizens can consume as much media as they wish using their mobile phones (the number of mobile phones exceeds the population size) or via cable networks, among other options. Access to telecommunication networks is unrestricted both in towns and in villages. From the perspective of online media, Darie said there is no monopoly or blockage. Private operators hold

the majority share of the market, and they have no interest in blockages; however, the panelists said vigilance is needed because the authorities periodically announce ominous initiatives to regulate the internet.

Most panelists reported problems with the distribution of periodicals that have not been solved in all the years of the existence of the Republic of Moldova. Burdeinii said that the monopolistic Post of Moldova (and, in the Chisinau municipality, Moldpresa) dictates the rules of the game for all print media. Mosneag added that in 2018, postmen sometimes delivered *Ziarul de Garda* to subscribers after long delays, sometimes of several days or even several weeks. For newspaper distribution, the Post of Moldova demands about 40 percent of the newspaper's cost—deriving greater benefit from delivering a newspaper than the outlet that produces it. Rusnac mentioned the disappearance of newspaper kiosks from the center of Chisinau under the pretext that kiosks negatively affect the aesthetics of the city. On the broadcast side, Barbă noted how the delay in the transition to digital terrestrial television restricts access to information.

The panelists agreed that information technologies and the internet are quite developed in Moldova; these are indicators that have held steady over the years and appear sustainable for the foreseeable future. Darie and Barbă commented that internet speeds in Moldova are higher than in some EU countries, and Ribca and Burdeinii noted that internet access is relatively inexpensive in urban and rural areas alike. This, however, is not necessarily a good thing, as some people in rural areas prefer to be informed by social networks rather than local and regional media offers. In addition, difficulties appear, especially in mobile telephony of “breaking” the internet, but it usually happens because of network overloads. Vasilica drew attention to the problematic

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reality of when infrastructure will be more advanced than the potential of many independent media outlets to produce content. In such a situation, politically affiliated outlets would have a much more consistent potential to use the infrastructure more efficiently for their purposes, which may be far from the public interest.

List of Panel Participants

Eugen Ribca, media law expert; director, Mold-Street, Chisinau

Aneta Gonta, media researcher; lecturer, State University of Moldova, Chisinau

Tudor Darie, manager and co-founder, Interact Media Company and Agora.md, Chisinau

Marina Bzovaia, deputy editor-in-chief, SP, Balti

Corneliu Rusnac, editor-in-chief, Radio Chisinau, Chisinau

Journalist (anonymous), region of Gagauz Yeri

Zinaida Savenco, project coordinator, IJC, Chisinau

Victor Mosneag, deputy editor-in-chief, *Ziarul de Garda*, Chisinau

Alexandr Burdeinii, editor-in-chief, InfoMarket, Chisinau

Valeriu Vasilica, director, IPN News Agency, Chisinau

The following participants submitted a questionnaire but did not attend the panel discussion:

Ludmila Barbă, editor-in-chief, Moldova 1, Chisinau

Luisa Dorosenco, director, Media Center, Tiraspol

Viorica Zaharia, journalist; president of the Press Council, Chisinau

Moderator and Author:

Ion Bunduchi, executive director, Association of Electronic Press in Moldova, Chisinau

The panel discussion was convened on November 22, 2018.