

Monitoring Report

Evaluation of Hate Speech in Online Media

Chisinau – 2015

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I. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. Monitoring period: 1–31 May 2015

Material monitored. Monitoring included all articles and comments on them that referred to people from groups that are frequent targets of discrimination and hate speech: ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, minority religious groups, refugees, graduates of boarding schools (orphanages), people with physical and mental disabilities, HIV positive people, people with tuberculosis, and former prison inmates.

The goal of monitoring. The goal was to determine the degree of correctness shown in online articles referring to these groups and in the moderation of comments posted by the readers of news portals and further to identify if either contained elements of hate speech, i.e., derogatory words, discriminatory expressions, labelling, stereotypes, or calls for violence or other forms of expression that propagate hatred and intolerance toward certain social groups.

The following portals were monitored: unimedia.md, publika.md, protv.md, jurnal.md, trm.md, moldova.org, deschide.md, stirilocale.md, realitatea.md, mirpmr.ru, dnestr.tv, newspmr.com, omg.md (only the Russian language content), esp.md and gagauzmedia.md.

1.2. Selection criteria

The portals were selected if:

- they posted news and other informative content;
- they posted informative content daily;
- they provided users with space for comments.

1.3. Definition of terms

In compliance with **Recommendation 97 (20)** of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers adopted on 30 October 1997, “The term *hate speech* shall be understood as covering all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of migrant origins.”¹

The Law of the Republic of Moldova on freedom of expression (no. 64 of 23 April 2010) contains (in Article 2) the following definition of *hate speech*: “...any form of expression which provokes, spreads, promotes or justifies racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance.”²

Another definition that served as a reference for this report was formulated by Kevin Boyle in his work *Hate Speech—the United States versus the Rest of the World* (2001) and reproduced by Romanian researchers Daniela Angi and Gabriel Badescu in the study they published in 2014 “**Hate Speech in Romania**”: “Hate speech represents a problematic category

¹ [http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/media/doc/translations/romanian/Rec\(1997\)020&ExpMem_ro.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/media/doc/translations/romanian/Rec(1997)020&ExpMem_ro.pdf)

² <http://lex.justice.md/index.php?action=view&view=doc&lang=1&id=335145>

of expression and related freedoms such as, for example, the freedom of association and assembly which involves supporting hatred and discrimination against various groups based on race, colour, ethnicity, religious beliefs, sexual orientation or another status.”³

The term “groups that are frequent targets of hate speech (vulnerable groups)” includes:

- ethnic minorities;
- sexual minorities;
- minority religious groups;
- refugees;
- pupils or graduates of boarding schools;
- people with disabilities (physical or mental);
- people infected with HIV;
- drug users;
- people with tuberculosis;
- prison inmates and former inmates.

1.4. Indicators

Quantitative indicators:

- number of subjects
- number of comments

Qualitative indicators:

Tone of articles. This indicator shows if journalists used the terms recommended by national and international organisations for the protection of human rights and for non-discrimination. Also, it shows if the language used by journalists contributes to generating hateful or hostile comments.

Tone of comments. This is an analysis of the language used by people who posted comments.

Messages. This indicator shows if articles and comments contain messages/expressions that fall under the aforementioned definitions of hate speech.

Case study. This is an example of an article accompanied by readers’ comments posted on the Internet where the subject and comments were managed incorrectly.

³ http://www.fdsc.ro/library/files/studiul_diu_integral.pdf

II. DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL NORMS THAT PROHIBIT HATE SPEECH

2.1. Legal norms

Hate speech is prohibited in the Republic of Moldova and in other European countries based on a range of international acts and domestic legislation. The **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights** stipulates in Article 20 that the law prohibits propaganda for war and any form of calls to national, racial or religious hatred, "...that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence."⁴

Also, the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers' **Recommendation 97 (20)** on hate speech defines the term and calls on states to prevent its spread.

Domestically, the **Constitution of the Republic of Moldova** provides the following in Article 32 "Freedom of opinion and expression" in paragraph (3): "The denigration of the state and the people; incitement to aggression, war or national, racial or religious hatred; calls for discrimination, territorial separatism or public violence as well as other displays that represent a threat to the constitutional regime are prohibited and punishable by law."⁵

The Law on freedom of expression protects the right of people and media institutions to expression but clearly stipulates in Article 3 paragraph 5 that the guarantees of freedom of expression "...do not include hate speech and instigation to violence."⁶

Article 346 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Moldova stipulates that "...intentional acts or public incitement including through mass media written or electronic aimed at incensing enmity, racial or religious differentiation or splitting to degrade national honour and dignity as well as directly or indirectly limiting rights or setting direct or indirect advantages for citizens depending on their national, ethnic, racial or religious affiliation"⁷ is punishable by a fine of up to 250 conventional units or non-remunerated labour to the benefit of the community from 180 to 240 hours or imprisonment of up to three years.

The law on ensuring equality (no. 121 of 25 May 2012) prohibits instigating discrimination, a term that means "...any behaviour through which a person applies pressure or intentionally behaves in such a manner as to discriminate against a third person based on the criteria stipulated in this law."⁸

⁴ http://www.dadalos.org/rom/menschenrechte/grundkurs_2/Materialien/dokument_5.htm

⁵ http://lex.justice.md/document_rom.php?id=44B9F30E:7AC17731

⁶ <http://lex.justice.md/index.php?action=view&view=doc&lang=1&id=335145>

⁷ <http://lex.justice.md/index.php?action=view&view=doc&id=331268>

⁸ <http://lex.justice.md/index.php?action=view&view=doc&lang=1&id=343361>

2.2. Ethical/Professional norms

The Code of Journalism of the Republic of Moldova stipulates in Chapter 4, item 4.15: “Journalists shall treat all people with whom they communicate as part of their jobs in an equal manner and shall not discriminate based on gender, age, ethnicity, religion, social status or sexual orientation.”⁹

The **Style Guide for Ethical Norms** is a publication for journalists that contains recommendations and examples of good practices and provides a list of terms recommended for preparing articles about groups that are frequent targets of discrimination or hate speech.¹⁰

2.3. Precedents in court referring to the liability of portal administrators for the content of comments

A document that specifically sets out for the first time that the owners of websites are liable for the content of readers’ comments is the Judgment of the European Court of Human Rights of 10 October 2013 in the case *Delfi vs. Estonia*.¹¹

The Court rejected the complaint filed by Delfi, one of the most popular news portals in Estonia, which the national courts had found guilty of denigration because it did not moderate the offensive comments readers posted with regard to a news item that damaged the image of a transportation company. The judgment, which became a precedent for the case law of member states of the Council of Europe, states that by not moderating a series of pejorative comments the Delfi portal, “...failed in its attempt to prevent them from becoming public, benefited from their existence, but allowed the authors to remain anonymous.”

Two court decisions in the Republic of Moldova found websites liable for the content of comments. Both referred to discriminatory and insulting comments about sexual minorities.

In **Oleg Brega vs. www.privesc.eu** reviewed in 2011–2012, the Court of Riscani District of Chisinau Municipality ruled that Privesc.EU Ltd. and PA Privesc.Eu were liable for, “...hate speech referring to people allegedly or being of homosexual orientation.” In the decision of the Supreme Court of Justice on 9 August 2012, the ruling of the court of first instance was made final and the companies had to pay to Mr. Oleg Brega 5000 lei for non-material damage and 200 lei as reimbursement for the state fee he had paid.¹²

The second case refers to discriminatory and hateful comments about LGBT people that were not moderated by the administrators of the website **www.protv.md**. The decision was handed down by the Court of Riscani District of Chisinau Municipality on 23 February 2015 but is not yet final. The court ruled that Pro Digital Ltd. was liable, “...for hateful, violent and discriminatory speech against people allegedly or known to be homosexual by not moderating comments on the website <http://protv.md>.”¹⁴

⁹ http://consiliuldepresa.md/fileadmin/fisiere/documente/cod_d_rom.pdf

¹⁰ http://www.unicef.org/moldova/Ghid_Etica_Jurnalist_RO.pdf

¹¹ [http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/eng/pages/search.aspx?i=001-126635#{"itemid":\["001-126635"\]}](http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/eng/pages/search.aspx?i=001-126635#{)

¹² http://jurisprudenta.csj.md/search_hot_old.php?id=35093

¹³ http://gdm.md/files/dispozitiv_fond_protv.pdf

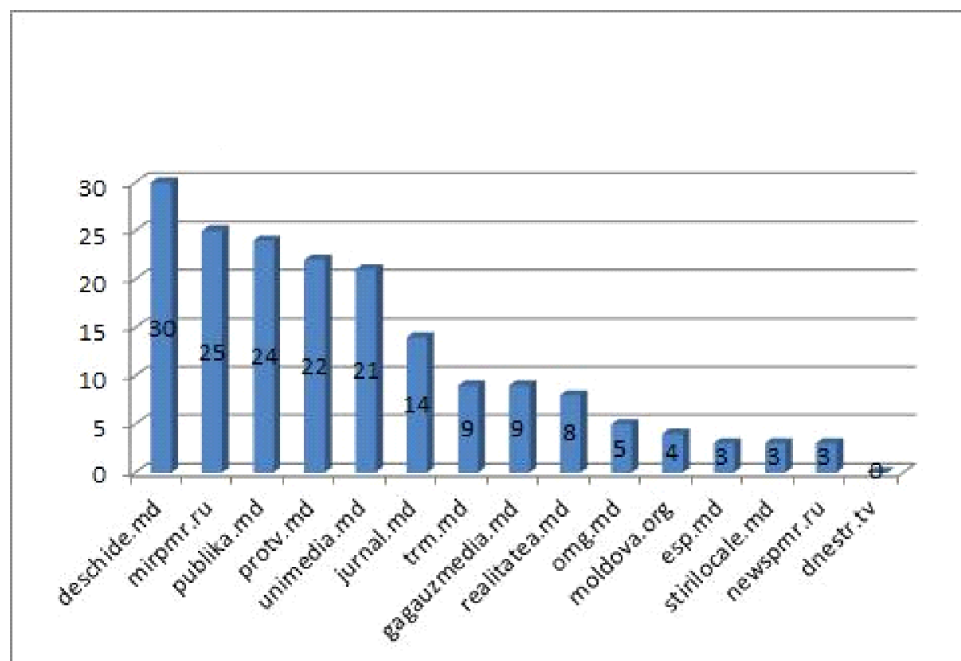
¹⁴ http://gdm.md/files/dispozitiv_fond_protv.pdf

III. THE RESULTS OF MONITORING

3.1. Quantitative dimension

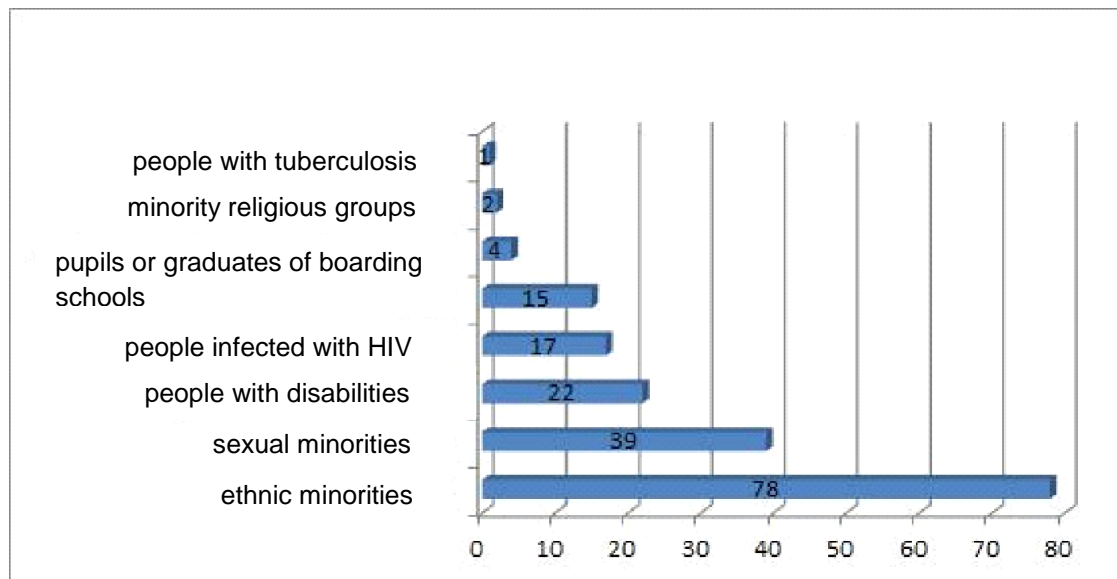
During May 2015, the 15 information portals monitored posted 174 news items referring to vulnerable groups. Most (30) were posted on **deschide.md**. At the opposite end was **dnestr.tv** which did not post any (Chart 1). The large number of articles posted on some portals was mainly due to the fact that every May in Chisinau the festival of sexual minorities “Rainbow over the Nistru” is held which is widely publicised in the news.

Chart 1. Total number of news items posted in May 2015 on the portals monitored



The large number is also explained by the fact that during the monitoring period another event of interest to the media occurred: the expulsion of George Simion, a Romanian citizen, from the Republic of Moldova. Although the news about George Simion presents political and ethnic issues, it was monitored because ethnic minorities are a vulnerable group in this report (Chart 2).

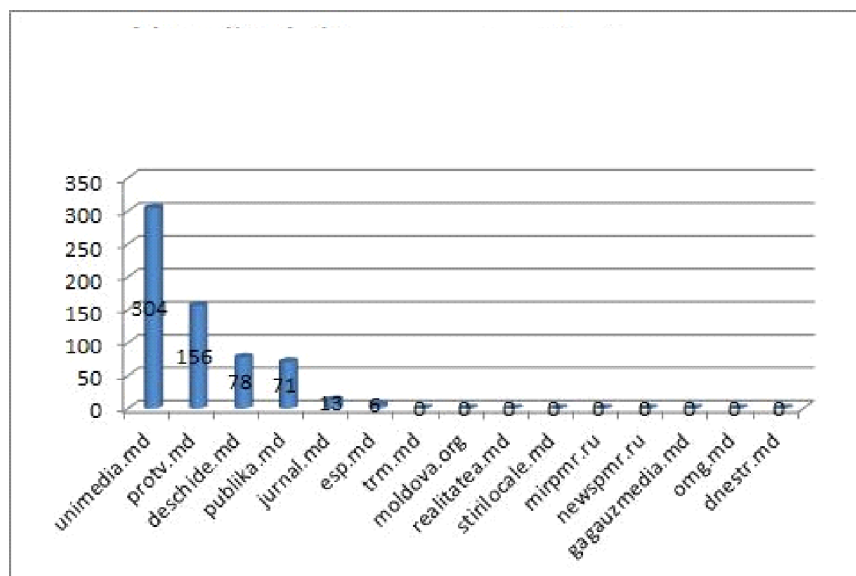
Chart 2. Number of news items posted by vulnerable group



3.2. Qualitative dimension

Both how news items were presented and how any comments posted were managed by each institution were also monitored.

Chart 3. Number of comments posted on each portal monitored



During the monitoring period, **trm.md** posted nine articles targeting monitored groups: three referring to ethnic minorities, three to sexual minorities, one about HIV positive people, one about inmates and one about people with disabilities. All the news articles were short and journalists used appropriate language and did not use stereotypes or derogatory terms. Readers did not post any comments on the website (Chart 3).

The portal administrators use the “Disqus” moderating system which was integrated into their content placing platform and allows comments only after the authentication of readers through Facebook, Twitter or Yahoo. This system bars indecent and insulting words. The author of the material is in charge of moderating comments and has to follow up on comments his/her product generated and reports to the shift producer or the manager of the department. If there are comments in a disparaging tone, the respective reader is warned. If the reader continues to post denigrating or insulting comments, he/she will be prohibited from doing so.¹⁵

In May, **jurnal.md** posted 14 articles about vulnerable groups: 5 referring to ethnic minorities; 4 about sexual minorities; 2 about inmates and 1 about students or graduates of boarding schools. All of them were written in neutral language appropriate for news items. Journalists did not use stereotypes or negativity, and the tone of the texts was also neutral.

Of the articles monitored, readers commented on only 5 for a total of 13 comments (Chart 3). Most (11) were on the articles about ethnic minorities (about the expulsion of George Simion). One comment referred to the article about people with disabilities and another to a juvenile inmate who escaped from prison. Most of the comments did not refer to people from vulnerable groups but rather to political leaders considered by the readers to be responsible for the situations in which those people found themselves. We quote the only comment on the article about the juvenile inmate who escaped but was subsequently recaptured:

They are still children, and you want to give them six years more. I know that before, if they escaped, they would give them two years more. Here, the laws are written targeting the poor; all the rich people are protected and stay at home in luxury. Criminal Parliament and justice for the people.¹⁶

The administration of this site uses an electronic filter that identifies words considered obscene. Readers can post comments only if they log in through Facebook. Reporters are in charge of moderating comments. Every two to three hours, they verify if there are any comments on their news items.¹⁷

During the monitoring period, **publika.md** posted 24 articles about people from vulnerable groups: 9 referred to people from ethnic minorities; 6 to sexual minorities; 4 to people with disabilities; 3 to inmates; 1 to HIV positive people and 1 to people from minority religious groups. With one exception, journalists used appropriate language and approaches. The exception was the item on 27 May “Controversy after Eurovision! The winner of the contest, Mens Zelmerlew, could be GAY” which exploits the sensational and suggests a negative anomaly.

In total, there were 71 comments on the news articles (Chart 3). The most commented on were the ones about ethnic minorities (30 comments) and sexual minorities (14). In both cases, the comments instigated violence, discrimination and hatred. The other comments posted were as follows: 12 about inmates; 7 on people with disabilities; 7 about religious groups and 1 about people infected with HIV. The article entitled “The leader of the movement ‘Actiunea 2012’ was banished from the Republic of Moldova” posted on 13 May received 12 comments, 3 of which were deleted by the editorial staff. Some of the remaining 9 contained aggressive and hateful

¹⁵ Information received following an interview with the administrators of the website www.trm.md

¹⁶ The comments of the readers, quoted as examples in this report, are reproduced with the original spelling and form as they were posted on the websites monitored.

¹⁷ Information received following an interview with the administrators of the website www.jurnal.md.

messages like the following:

“Death to occupants and traitors!” (Annex 1)

“EVERY DAY PLAHOTNIUC SPITS ON OUR SOULS, ALL OF US: THE RUSSIANS, THE GAGAUZ, THE ROMANIANS. AND IF THIS PERSON DIES HIS OWN DEATH, THEN, WE, THE BASARABIANS, ARE BUTTERHEADS.” (Annex 2)

The news about the fact that participants in the march of sexual minorities were attacked with eggs and bullied by a group of Christians (Orthodox) posted on 17 May entitled “NO COMMENT: fighting and hatred during the march for equality for sexual minorities” received 13 comments. Some of them contained derogatory words and hate messages (Annex 3) including the following:

“down with all faggots in moldova together with gays and lesbians and also hold hands with the parliament and the government. We want a country without fags! Fags go to gay Euro-ass!”

The following comment containing a call to violence and hate speech was posted about the article on 29 May entitled “THE POLICE WERE ALERTED! A man arrested for major theft escaped”

“(…) And the bandit caught and liquidated by public decapitation! He will never go straight, he will be a robber his whole life!!!” (Annex 4)

This kind of comment needs to be moderated by administrators, i.e., barred.

On publika.md readers can comment only if they log in through Facebook. Recently, the administrators introduced this tool as a way of preventing comments with offensive content. They also have a filtering system for comments that contains a list of prohibited words. The site does not have a person in charge of moderating comments; it is the editors who post the news who are responsible for that. They moderate comments very rarely, mainly when there are calls for assault or for violence.¹⁸

Unimedia.md posted 21 news items about monitored groups: 14 referred to ethnic minorities (Romanians, Russians, Jews); 4 to sexual minorities and 1 each to HIV-infected people, people with disabilities and inmates. The language was neutral and in compliance with ethical norms. The texts contained information without expressing the opinions of their authors.

In total, the items generated 304 comments, the largest number among all the news portals monitored for this report. Most comments (234) were posted on the 14 articles referring to ethnic minorities (the expulsion of the Romanian George Simion or the arrest of Russian citizens in the Republic of Moldova). The news about the march for equality for sexual minorities received 44 comments, the news about people with disabilities received 25 comments and the news about the escaped inmate got 1 comment. Most comments were neutral, encouraging or critical of the government. There were, however, some displaying a hostile attitude toward certain social groups.

¹⁸ Information received following an interview with the administrators of the website www.publika.md

Most of the negative and insulting messages were generated by the items about sexual minorities and people of Russian ethnicity. Although there were notes that some comments had been deleted by the administrators, the portal did not adequately monitor all comments since there were violent messages and messages containing obscene words. The item posted on 13 May “The leader of platform ‘Actiunea 2012’ was expelled from the country” received 30 comments. Four of them contained hateful messages about Russians and were written by the same person as follow:

“(...) all kinds of Russian pigs are walking around Moldova and tear apart our society (...)”

“(...) we don’t need a lot of ethnicities, (...) chase away the Russian loving curs to Siberia to the stables of the infamous, alcoholics, drug users, cotton brains, criminals, killers, dirty people” (Annex 5).

“these pig curs must be shot”

Other news items about George Simion’s expulsion from Moldova also got comments denigrating Russians calling them “bastard Russians” or “stinking Russians” (Annex 6).

The news item “The Russian Ambassador in Chisinau bothered by the Minority Integration Strategy” posted on 16 May generated 51 comments of which 10 were derogatory using obscene and indecent words about Ambassador Farit Muhametsin (Annex 7). One comment was deleted by the administrators. The following is an example:

“(...) these trash minorities who live, eat and strangle the people of Moldova as a majority nation; with the help of Communist, Socialist and Democratic imbeciles who should get their snots wired just like peasants in the countryside do to their pigs (...)”

Of the four news items referring to sexual minorities posted by unimedia, only two received comments. The article “The march of homosexuals in Chisinau resulted in fighting between priests and policemen” posted on 17 May received 42 comments 6 of which contained insulting and obscene words about sexual minorities; the rest were neutral. The following is an example:

“Why is a handful of Russian faggots allowed to defile the citizens of the Republic of Moldova with parades for sodomy? Let them ***** at home (...)”. (On the portal, the obscene word was not deleted.)

Also, the article posted on 7 May “People with mental disabilities will be able to vote” got a lot of comments in a political context. Readers used derogatory words like “mentally challenged” or “retards” (Annex 8).

The portal administration uses a “self-moderation” system that allows other readers to assess every comment posted; comments that receive a certain number of negative votes are removed. Also, www.unimedia.md has a system of filters that prohibits obscene words. The news room has a person in charge of moderation, but because of the large number of posts and the other work this person has to do in addition to moderation, he/she does not always manage to see all comments; that is why there are comments posted on the site containing

obscene words and hate messages.¹⁹

During the monitoring period, **moldova.org** published only four articles referring to the groups of people that are the subject of this report: three were about the march for equality for sexual minorities and one was a success story about a person with disabilities. Their language and tone were appropriate for these topics. There were no comments posted. The portal does not have filters for comments. Readers can post comments only if they log on through Facebook. Facebook also notifies the administrators about any new comments. Each reporter or the person who first sees the notification moderates the comment, i.e., accepts or rejects it, depending on its content. Comments containing indecent words or threats are not posted.²⁰

The portal **realitatea.md** posted eight relevant news items in May 2015: two about sexual minorities, two about ethnic minorities, two about people with disabilities, one about inmates and one about people with HIV. The language complied with the norms of neutral journalism and did not label or contain stereotypes. No comments were posted on any of the news items. The portal uses a filtering system for obscene words. Comments become visible immediately after they are written; there is no need for the approval of a moderator. Reporters verify which comments were posted on their articles and if the content is “serious” the comment is removed. Readers prefer to post their opinions on the Facebook page of this media entity.²¹

The website **protv.md** posted 22 relevant articles: 9 about ethnic minorities; 9 about sexual minorities; 1 about graduates of boarding schools; 1 about inmates; 1 about people with disabilities; and 1 about people infected with HIV. The authors used neutral, sometimes uplifting language (for example a human interest story about a student at a boarding school whose life changed when he was adopted by a family from the United States). The language complied with ethical norms presenting facts and information without the opinions of the authors; there were no stereotypes or pejorative words.

In total, 156 comments were posted on news articles: 131 about sexual minorities, 17 about ethnic minorities, 3 about boarding school graduates (orphanages) and 2 comments each on inmates and people infected with HIV and one about disabled people. There were no comments on the news item about people with disabilities. Of the comments about sexual minorities, 74 were about fights between Orthodox Christians and the participants in the march for equality for sexual minorities; another article on the same topic received 36 comments. The remaining articles received from one to nine comments. Most comments on sexual minorities contained both positive and negative messages about public demonstrations by sexual minorities, but they did not contain obscene, disparaging or hateful words.

The portal’s administrators use electronic filters that identify messages containing obscene words or calls for violence; such comments are barred from the website. Readers log in through Facebook, a system that has been in place for several months. Previously, readers could post comments without logging in. Comments are moderated by the editors of the website.²²

Deschide.md posted a total of 30 articles referring to vulnerable groups. The large number was due to the expulsion of George Simion, a topic that was covered more by **deschide.md**

¹⁹ Information received following an interview with the administrators of the website www.unimedia.md.

²⁰ Information received following an interview with the administrators of the website www.moldova.org.

²¹ Information received following an interview with the administrators of the website www.realitatea.md.

²² Information received following an interview with the administrators of the website www.protv.md.

than by any other website monitored. The portal published 21 articles on ethnic minorities, 6 about sexual minorities and 3 about inmates. Although this portal posted more news on Simion's detention and deportation from Moldova than other news media did, the language complied with ethical norms. The news on this topic was presented in an unbiased manner and included a second source. In total, these articles received 78 comments, 66 of which were about George Simion. There were 11 about the activities of ethnic minorities, and only 1 comment was posted in reference to the 3 articles about inmates. Most comments were neutral or supportive, but there were offensive messages and hate speech. An example is the following comment on the item posted on 17 May "Six people detained at the march of homosexuals":

"They should all be thrown against a wall, they think they have rights...How is it possible to have such laws in a Christian country?"

Comments on the article posted on 17 May "The LGBT community was attacked with eggs and firecrackers by the protestors" included the following:

"They should all be shot, the communists, the socialists, the gays and the lesbians, and transsexuals and bisexuals, and Putin ass-kissers and Putin suckers. Shoot all the"(the word was not blocked on the website) (Annex 9)

"The gays from Brussels are not as scary as the faggots from the Kremlin"

The following comment was on the 13 May article "Confirmed. The leader of the Platform 'Actiunea 2012' was banished from the Republic of Moldova":

"(...) it came down to gypsies cleaning our house" (Annex 10)

The portal www.deschide.md uses filters for obscene words. An operator verifies comments every week, and if he/she discovers "indecent" comments" they are deleted.²³

Stirilocale.md posted three news articles about vulnerable groups: two about inmates and one about religious groups. These articles were taken from press releases or from other portals and were written using informative language without deviations from ethical norms. None of the items received comments. Comments from readers of this portal are first received on the email account of the administration, then they are posted/moderated by someone on the team.²⁴

Mirpmr.ru²⁵ posted 25 relevant news articles: 9 about people with disabilities; 9 about people infected with HIV; 4 about ethnic minorities; 2 about students and graduates of boarding schools and 1 about people with tuberculosis. None of the articles had a negative tone; the language and approach used were appropriate except for the use of the word "invalid" which is not recommended in the *Style Guide for Ethical Norms*. One news item referring to ethnic minorities received three comments written by the same user, all of which were deleted by the administrators.

²³ Information received following an interview with the administrators of the website www.deschide.md.

²⁴ Information received following an interview with the administrators of the website www.stirilocale.md.

²⁵ The editorial staff of the Mirpmr.ru portal was contacted to provide information about the moderation of comments on their site, but they did not respond during the preparation time for this study.

Newspmr.com²⁶ posted three relevant news articles: one about people infected with HIV, one about ethnic minorities and one about people with disabilities. No comments were posted.

During the monitoring period, **gagauzmedia.md** published nine relevant news articles: five about ethnic minorities; two about people with disabilities and two about people infected with HIV. The editorial staff observed the ethics for writing descriptions. The relatively high number of items referring to ethnic minorities was due to the fact that an ethnic-cultural festival was organised in Comrat in May. The news about this event was positive and presented ethnic minorities from an exclusively positive perspective. The articles did not receive any comments.

Readers can post comments on the gagauzmedia.md portal only after logging into Facebook. An editor monitors the comments when necessary. The portal administrator noted that usually there are only a few comments and they are decent due to the fact that it is not possible to post comments anonymously.²⁷

Esp.md posted only three articles referring to vulnerable groups: one about sexual minorities (taken from publika.md); one about ethnic minorities and one about inmates. The language of the articles was neutral and in compliance with ethical norms; no insults or stereotypes were used. The news article on sexual minorities (the march with fights in the centre of Chisinau) was the only one that received comments: one was neutral while five were negative but did not contain offensive words or hate speech. The following comment contained a call for violence but was toned down, and the editorial staff noted the fact:

“sooner or later, there will be a parade in Balti as well”

“They’d better not! Balti inhabitants...!!!” Editorial note: this comment was moderated.

The administrators of www.esp.md do not use filters for obscene words. Readers can post comments without logging in though it is necessary to indicate a name and an email address. The editorial staff has a person in charge of moderating comments; he/she edits them (i.e. eliminates obscene expressions or words, hate speech and calls for violence) or deletes them all together. Comments can be moderated by other journalists as well when the person in charge does not manage to do so. The number of comments usually increases during elections.²⁸

The portal **omg.md** published five relevant articles: four about ethnic minorities and one about sexual minorities. All the articles posted under the heading “news” were written using language that went beyond the language appropriate for news items. The opinion of the author was present and in some cases (as in the following example), there were a lot of negative remarks that were not accompanied by facts. None of the articles got comments. One of the articles on ethnic minorities was presented as news, but the content is very similar to that of a comment. The tone of the article could cause hostility between ethnic groups.

The media holding of disreputable businessman, Vladimir Plahitnuiuc, “distinguished” itself once again by spreading disinformation and lies. On Tuesday, on one of the talk shows on TV channel Publika, sensational information was broadcast for which this channel controlled by Plahotniuc

²⁶ The editorial staff of the Newspmr.com portal was contacted to provide information about the moderation of comments on their site, but they did not respond during the preparation time for this study.

²⁷ Information received following an interview with the administrators of the website www.gagauzmedia.md

²⁸ Information received following an interview with the administrators of the website www.esp.md

can claim an unexpected prize for the editors of Plahotniuc's holding on 1/1 D. Cantemir Boulevard. One of the regular guests of Plahotniuc's holding—the unionist Romanian A. Petrencu—pontificated on the air of the “only news channel” that “based on statistical data, Taraclia District is a district where Bulgarians do not represent the majority of population.” “In Taraclia District, Romanians are the majority of population!” insisted the invited “expert.” As they say, such a lie is at home on this channel. Not the moderator, nor the main expert of the TV channel who is involved in Romania in a criminal case of pedophilia, nor the editors of the TV channel that daily broadcasts deceitful Plahotniuc propaganda to the entire country even tried to contradict such a damnable lie. Obviously, this is due to the fact that Plahotniuc's minions actually believe it is true and do not suspect that Taraclia is a district that is densely populated by Bulgarians.

When this study was completed, the portal www.omg.md was not providing the option of posting comments; however, during the monitoring period, readers were able to post comments.

In May, **dnestr.tv** did not post any relevant articles.

3.3. The tone of news items and comments

In most of the material monitored, the authors complied with ethical norms on language, on the tone of narration and on the approach to vulnerable groups. Journalists did not use stereotypes, labelling or stigmatising expressions and did not articulate their own opinions. The only exception was the news item posted by www.omg.md, “Plahotniuc's minions think that Bulgarians are a minority in Taraclia District” in which the journalist took the occasion of writing about ethnic minorities to write a news item/comment criticising a TV station.

At times the tone of comments on **unimedia.md**, **publika.md** and **deschide.md** seriously deviated from common sense, ethical norms and legislation. Some posted by readers contained specific calls for violence and spread an attitude of intolerance toward some ethnicities or sexual minorities.

3.4. Case study of www.unimedia.md

On 17 May, **www.unimedia.md** posted the item, “The march of homosexuals resulted in fights between priests and policemen” which received 42 comments. The text of the article was balanced; reporters briefly presented facts using neutral language without expressing their own opinions. Although this was a controversial topic, journalists proved to be unbiased toward the parties involved as the Code of Journalism provides. The photos that accompanied the text contained decent and informative images.

In most of the 42 comments, readers criticised the representatives of sexual minorities for their public event while the priests and their followers were criticised for trying to prevent a peaceful march in a violent manner. Some comments like the following contained obscene words and derogatory expressions about sexual minorities or aggressive believers:

“In Moldova, faggots ARE NOT ROMANIANS, ONLY RUSSIANS!”

“Why is a handful of Russian fags allowed to defile the citizens of Republic of Moldova

with parades for sodomy? They should f.... themselves at home.”

“Look who the actors are: fag homosexuals who are not Romanian by ethnicity but Russian and the holy joes of the Moldovan Metropolitan under the Russian Church!”

These comments should have been moderated/barred by the administrators of the site because they denigrate sexual minorities and call for homophobia and inter-ethnic hatred and violate the legal provisions on hate speech. These messages contain only insults and have nothing to do with freedom of expression but instead violate the rights and reputations of people. Since these comments were not moderated, Article 5 of the Code of Journalism providing that, “Journalists shall treat equally all people they come into contact with during their work and shall not discriminate based on gender, age, ethnicity, religion, social status or sexual orientation” was violated. Also, the staff can be accused of spreading messages that fall under the scope of Article 346 of the Criminal Code: “intentional actions, public calls, including through mass media, written and electronic, aiming at instigating enmity, national, racial or religious differentiation or disunity, in order to belittle national honour and dignity.”

IV. Conclusions

- The language and tone of articles posted complied with the norms of journalism and the Code of Journalism except the article “Plahotniuc’s minions think that Bulgarians are a minority in Taraclia District.” This suggests that journalists/editors of portals know the language rules and how to approach topics on vulnerable groups. There were no instances of news items using pejorative words (except the word “invalid” which, although not derogatory, is not recommended by specialists) referring to the groups monitored.
- Hate speech was present in the readers’ comments on several of the portals monitored. The most serious instances of hate speech were registered in the news items about sexual and ethnic minorities.
- The majority of comments containing hate speech and insults were registered on the portals **unimedia.md** and **publika.md**. **Deschide.md** also posted these kinds of comments.
- The portals **jurnal.md**, **protv.md** and **esp.md** efficiently moderated comments. No comments containing hate speech or obscene words were posted.
- The readers of the portals **trm.md**, **moldova.org**, **stirilocale.md**, **realitatea.md**, **mirpmr.ru**, **dnestr.tv**, **newspmr.com**, **omg.md** and **gagauzmedia.md** either did not post any comments on the articles monitored or they were barred by administrators.

V. Recommendations

- The owners/editors of information portals should make more efforts to moderate readers' comments because they are liable for their content and can be held liable for hate messages and for offensive and derogatory messages in accordance with the Judgment of the European Court of Human Rights of 30 October 2013.
- The editors of portals should take ethical norms into account when they decide to accept or reject a comment on their websites.
- Each editorial staff member should have access to the Code of Journalism in online format or on paper and to the *Style Guide for Ethical Norms* and other resources recommended for media organizations that contain lists of acceptable terms so that website journalists and content managers can verify expressions and words when they have doubts about how to use them or when they moderate comments.
- It is necessary to periodically train journalists in charge of managing online content to help them identify messages and expressions containing hate speech in the comments of readers in order to not post them on their websites.
- Efficient screening/moderation of comments would discourage people from spreading hate messages from posting them and to a certain extent would contribute to educating readers.
- Not allowing comments is not a recommended solution since if they are not able to express their opinions, readers could be discouraged from using the respective news portal as a source of information.

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