



# STUDY

## Measuring perceptions of sociopolitical news by the media audience in The Republic of Moldova

On the basis of an analysis by  
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## *Propaganda, when it is pervasive, massive*

and systematic, is detrimental to the freedom of the media. This phenomenon destroys the core of the profession of journalism. It makes journalists hostages of some sort, typically the government's and thus hits at the independence of the media. Journalists are forced or bribed to be mere conduits of the messages. If dominant in a given country, propaganda becomes an instrument to establish authoritarianism, thus distorting not just pluralism of the media but other basic foundations of a democracy. Meanwhile, it affects the public trust in the free media, in the values and the meaning of the profession.

I strongly believe that media plurality and free media are antidotes to propaganda as are media literacy campaigns that lead to informed choices. Propaganda may be restricted, but only in narrow, specific instances. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights expressly bans propaganda for war and incitement to hatred in Article 20 as does the European Convention on Human Rights in Article 10 and Article 17.

There are specific tools available to fight biased and misleading information, including rules on balance and accuracy in broadcasting; guarantees of the independence of media regulators; vibrant public service broadcasting with a special mission to include all viewpoints; a clear distinction between fact and opinion in journalism and transparency of media ownership.

These tools, taken together, make up professional, courageous and investigative journalism. There is no democracy without such journalism, and there is no future without democracy.<sup>1</sup>

***Dunja Mijatović,***  
***Organization for Security and Co-operation***  
***n Europe Representative on Freedom of the Media***

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<sup>1</sup> Propaganda and Freedom of the Media, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, 2015, available at <http://www.osce.org/fom/203926?download=true>

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# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Overview

This research study was conducted as part of a project implemented by the Independent Journalism Center (IJC), a leading Moldovan media non-government organization (NGO), in cooperation with the Institute of Marketing, Analysis and Surveys (IMAS) in Chisinau. A team of experts including Ivan Godársky from the Slovak media-monitoring organization MEMO 98 and Tamara Caraus from Moldova conducted the data analysis.

**The overall objective:** To map public perceptions of international news—in particular of Russian and US origins—and potentially to improve conditions for Moldovan citizens to have access to fair and reliable information in the media, allowing them to make informed decisions on public affairs.

**The specific objective:** To strengthen Moldovan news media capacity to independently produce high-quality, diversified journalism for different platforms and audiences to fulfill its potential role as a driver for democratic change.

In addition, the project findings were also designed to contribute to future activities in the Moldovan media landscape, *inter alia* to:

- supply the media, political entities, regulatory organs, citizens, civil society and international community with data, findings and recommendations to assess the broadcasting sector;
- raise public awareness and encourage journalists to observe standards of diverse, balanced and unbiased reporting without prejudice and stereotypes;
- help citizens better understand the role of mass media.

The project was also supposed to:

- enhance the capacity of the civil and academic communities in conducting advanced media research;
- put public pressure on media institutions to provide information that is more accurate, impartial and fair.



## 1.2. Background

The rationale for the questions about foreign media, manipulation and propaganda in this survey, especially in the focus group sessions, was the current debate in Moldovan civil society about the necessity to protect national information space from increased Russian media propaganda. According to observers, following the dramatic developments of 2014—the political crisis in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, the Western sanctions imposed on Russia and the armed conflict in Ukraine’s east—Russian television has made considerable use of propaganda.<sup>2</sup>

To counter propaganda from Kremlin friendly Russian broadcasting outlets in Moldova, amendments to the Moldovan Audiovisual Code (260-XVI from 2006) were proposed in April and May 2015. These drafts were in part inspired by regional attempts to offer legal responses to Russian propaganda as occurred in Latvia, Lithuania and Ukraine.<sup>3</sup> The amendments referred to the broadcasting and rebroadcasting of foreign programs, to the broadcasting of information and analytical programs and the domestic shares of such programs, to local audiovisual production and to sanctions. The draft laws introduced norms for ensuring the state’s information security by strengthening the powers of the Broadcast Coordinating Council. They would ban foreign propaganda in information and analytical programs and increase the domestic share of such programs and of programs broadcast in the official language.

Under the proposed changes, Moldova would no longer be able to disseminate news or news-related programs from countries that have not ratified the *2002 European Convention on Trans-border Television*, a set of international standards for rebroadcasts. Russia, which provides about half of the programming on Moldovan cable networks that reach an estimated 19% of the country’s more than 1.13 million households—has signed but not ratified the pact. Moscow has denounced the possible ban as “discrimination” that could have unspecified consequences for relations between the two countries. In 2015, Moldova banned transmissions of Kremlin-controlled station Rossiya 24 and prevented several journalists from Kremlin-linked broadcasters from entering the country.

The drafts were, however, controversial because they contained a proposal for regulating the content of broadcasting in a manner that could interfere with editorial freedom and could threaten freedom of expression. The claims about fighting Russian TV propaganda were considered by representatives of civil society to be “a mask” and a trap that would end up placing curbs on journalists’ ability to cover Moldovan government activities.

Alarmed at the potential impact of these changes, 30 media organizations and NGOs requested that parliament postpone further votes on the draft regulations. The drafts were then sent to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) for comment. According to

<sup>2</sup> Maria Lipman, *How Russia has come to loathe the West*, 13 March 2015, available at [http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_how\\_russia\\_has\\_come\\_to\\_loathe\\_the\\_west311346](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_how_russia_has_come_to_loathe_the_west311346)

<sup>3</sup> Andrei G. Richter, *Legal Response to Propaganda Broadcasts Related to Crisis in and Around Ukraine, 2014–2015*, available in *International Journal of Communication* 9(2015)

the OSCE response, “Restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of the media should be avoided as much as possible. There should not be any attempts to ban propaganda through legislation, as this notion and what is related to it is difficult to define objectively.... Although recognizing the legitimate concerns of countries subject to intense propaganda from other countries, the proposed ban on informative and similar programs from most of the world is a blunt and at the same time disproportionate tool against propaganda.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, the legal opinion of the Council of Europe states that, “It has to be clear that vague and restrictive provisions may easily amount to censorship, and that hate and false speech is best counteracted by more speech, by pluralism of views, an open debate and a clear position.”<sup>5</sup> No date has been announced yet for parliament’s next debate on the amendments.

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<sup>4</sup> Representative on Freedom of the Media, available at <http://www.osce.org/fom/175681?download=true>

<sup>5</sup> Council of Europe, available at <https://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/media/Cooperation%20Legal%20expertise%20delivered%20by%20Council%20of%20Europe.pdf>

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The project comprised a two-tiered system of data collection consisting of structured surveys and focus groups sessions with selected audience categories. The methodology was developed by an expert from MEMO 98, an organization that has carried out media monitoring projects in 50 countries in the last 17 years.<sup>6</sup> It included a quantitative analysis of public opinion via questionnaires that focused on the most relevant aspects of international messages—especially of Russian and United States (US) origin—broadcast as part of the news programs on major television channels in Moldova. A qualitative analysis conducted via targeted focus groups examined the information provided in the questionnaires in a more specific and detailed way and addressed ethical and professional standards.

Given its comprehensive, content-oriented approach, this study was specially designed to provide in-depth feedback on the diversity and reliability of media reporting, in particular on international affairs. The main goal was to assess whether Moldovan television stations provide their viewers with objective and balanced information about important international issues. Also, a detailed analysis of the quality of news programming on selected foreign TV channels was conducted.

### ***Data gathering methods***

The most common way to use a quantitative method for assessing media content is through surveys. Surveys are extremely useful when data are to be collected first hand for the explicit purpose of a baseline assessment. As a practice, quantitative surveys are typically administered through a questionnaire. For this study the questionnaire comprised 26 very structured, mostly close-ended questions that did not allow answers to deviate.

The focus groups aimed to enhance the participation of relevant opinion makers from the audience sample that was initially approached with the questionnaires. In a participatory approach, participants/respondents contribute to the assessment, including the immediate analysis of the findings, and take part in the identification of indicators to measure impact. The focus groups gathered people's views on where why, how and to what extent impact occurred.

Participatory methods improve the quality and reliability of information, and the participants help ensure the inclusion of social and cultural factors that are difficult to measure in a standard survey. Furthermore, involving participants in providing evidence or gathering information creates more ownership of the project and a better level of understanding of the findings among stakeholders.

In a focus group discussion, participants in general come from similar

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<sup>6</sup> For more information, see also [www.memo98.sk](http://www.memo98.sk)



backgrounds and have significant shared experiences (i.e., directors/media house managers, editors-in-chief/senior journalists) and are brought together to discuss a specific topic of interest. Homogeneous samples are preferred because mixing groups may inhibit some people from expressing their views or may confuse the focus of the discussion.

## Data gathering phases

### Phase 1 (quantitative phase)

### Questionnaires

- ✓ **Period:** 23 October – 5 November
- ✓ **Sample:** Stratified (the population was divided into subgroups), probabilistic (a method of sampling that utilizes some form of random selection), tri-stage;
- ✓ Persons who stated interest in news on sociopolitical topics (see Table 1).
- ✓ **Sample size:** 1,137 respondents (686 rural and 451 urban)
- ✓ **Sampling error:** +/- 3%
- ✓ **Representativeness:** representative of the adult population of the Republic of Moldova excluding the Transnistrian region.
- ✓ **Stratification:** 12 territorial administrative units, 4 types of residence
- ✓ **Randomization:** 74 localities, households/family/person
- ✓ **Interviews:** Home, in Romanian and Russian

**Table 1: Socio-demographic profile of respondents**

Variable	Group	No. of people	Percent
<b>Sex</b>	Male	514	45,2
	Female	623	54,8
<b>Age</b>	18–29	252	22,2
	30–44	295	25,9
	45–59	285	25,1
	Over 60	305	26,8
<b>Education</b>	Incomplete secondary education	153	13,5
	Secondary/vocational school	228	20,1
	Lyceum/post-lyceum /college	461	40,5
	Higher education	293	25,8
	No answer	2	0,2
<b>Occupation</b>	Employed	446	39,2
	Temporarily unemployed	204	17,9
	Unemployed	471	41,4
	Don't know/No answer	16	1,4
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Moldovan	976	85,8
	Other	161	14,2
<b>Area of residence</b>	Municipality	251	22,1
	Town > 14,000 inhabitants	122	10,7
	Town < 14,000 inhabitants	78	6,9
	Rural	686	60,3
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>1137</b>	<b>100,0</b>

**Purpose:**

- To obtain a set of quantitative data mapping audience perceptions of the topic
- To receive early indicators of challenges and patterns
- To learn about the understanding of respondents on the role of the media

## ***What is a public opinion poll?***

A scientific, unbiased public opinion poll is a type of survey or inquiry designed to measure the public's views regarding a particular topic or series of topics. Trained interviewers ask questions of people chosen at random from the population sample. Responses are given, and interpretations are made based on the results. It is important in a random sample that everyone in the population studied has an equal chance to participate otherwise the results could be biased and therefore not representative. Representative samples are chosen in order to make generalizations about a particular population to be studied.

## ***Why are opinion polls important?***

### *Helping ordinary people to be heard*

Polls tell us what proportion of a population has a specific viewpoint. They do not explain why respondents believe as they do or how to change their minds. This is the work of social scientists and scholars. Polls are simply measurement tools that tell us how a population thinks and feels about any given topic.

This can be useful in helping different cultures understand one another because it gives people a chance to speak for themselves instead of letting only vocal media stars speak on their behalf. Opinion polling gives people who do not usually have access to the media an opportunity to be heard.

## ***How are face-to-face samples selected?***

Such surveys, also known as in-person interviews, are conducted with the interviewer and the respondent seated across from each other. The interviewer reads material from the questionnaire and records the responses. At times the interviewer may hand a card to the respondent to select a response(s).

Scientific face-to-face surveys are normally conducted using geographic probability sampling. Some refer to this as block sampling. This is done by dividing a given population into blocks of roughly equal population densities. Each block is further divided until a single household is chosen at random, and then a single respondent is randomly chosen from the household.

## How does one read opinion polls?

Percentages in an opinion poll reflect the proportion of a given population that gives a particular response with allowances for potential sampling errors. For example, if the results of a scientific poll with  $\pm 3\%$  margin of error claim that 30% of Moldovans like ice cream, this means that if we asked all Moldovans this question, we would expect between 27% and 33% to say they like ice cream.

## How are scientific polls different from other polls?

When a radio or TV station asks listeners to call in to vote on a particular issue, the results are not scientific because the sample is not representative. The sample reflects only the people who happen to be watching or listening to the show and who are motivated to call in. This cannot be generalized to represent the whole population because the respondents were not randomly selected; therefore, they are not representative.<sup>7</sup>

### Phase 2 (qualitative phase)

### Focus groups

- ✓ 6 groups
- ✓ By language: Romanian (4) / Russian (2),
- ✓ By residence: urban (4) / rural (2)
- ✓ By age: under 36 (3) / over 36 (3)
- ✓ 51 participants
- ✓ October 2015

#### Purpose:

- To obtain a specific, qualitative understanding of audience perceptions
- To understand accurately the problems media face reporting on a topic
- To understand citizens' perceptions of media content and professionalism
- To identify the most feasible methods and approaches for reporting change

The focus group sessions provided qualitative data for an in-depth exploration of a topic that has not been approached before in research on mass media in the Republic of Moldova: measuring and comparing public perception of news items of Russian origin with those of US origin in Moldovan media content and concomitantly evaluating the audience's perception of the media in general and of sociopolitical news in particular.

<sup>7</sup> The Gallup Organization, *Polling and how to use it*, 2007, available at <http://media.gallup.com/muslimwestfacts/PDF/PollingAndHowToUseItR1drevENG.pdf>

## Aims

The aims of the focus group research were to obtain a specific, qualitative understanding of audience perceptions of the media, to understand citizens' perceptions of media content and professionalism and to identify the most feasible methods and approaches for facilitating critical thinking in perceiving media content by media consumers in Moldova. The specific objectives were the following:

- to identify the preferred sources of sociopolitical news;
- to evaluate audience capacity to identify trustworthy news;
- to evaluate audience ability to identify manipulation and propaganda elements in mass media content;
- to evaluate the degree of trust in local mass media, in Russian, European Union (EU) and US media and in mass media in general;
- to analyze and compare perceptions of a news item on the same topic/ event reported by US and Russian media.

## Methods

To achieve these aims, six focus groups were organized from general audiences as presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Focus group composition**

Nr.	Nr. Participants	Age	Language	Target	Residence
FG 1	8	36 - 55	Russian	Regularly watch news on TV and follow other sources (online, press, radio)	Chişinău
FG 2	8	18 - 35	Russian	Regularly watch news on TV and follow other sources (online, press, radio)	Bălţi
FG 3	8	18 - 35	Romanian	Regularly watch news on TV and follow other sources (online, press, radio)	Chişinău
FG 4	8	36 – 55	Romanian	Regularly watch news on TV and follow other sources (online, press, radio)	Cahul
FG 5	9	36 - 55	Romanian	Regularly watch news on TV and follow other sources (online, press, radio)	Sîngerei (rural)
FG 6	10	18 – 35	Romanian	Regularly watch news on TV and follow other sources (online, press, radio)	Orhei (rural)

The participants were selected according to the following criteria: gender (female, male); age (18–35, 35–55); residence (urban, rural); language (Romanian/Russian); level of education (basic, middle, high) and socio-economic status (unemployed, employed specifying occupation). For the complete profile of participants in the focus groups see the annexes at the end of this report.

The focus group sessions were semi-structured with a questioning route comprising 5 parts: (1) introduction (10 minutes to present the topic, the role of the moderator and for participants to present themselves), (2) general perception of mass media (15 minutes), (3) perception of the news (20 minutes), (4) manipulation and propaganda in mass media (25 minutes), (5) watching and discussing two news items (25 minutes) and one final question: “If you could offer advice to news reporters, how would you tell them to improve their products”? (5 minutes) The focus group sessions lasted 100 minutes.

### Phase 3

### Data analysis and interpretation

Upon completing the data gathering, the IJC in consultation with experts analyzed the reports prepared by IMAS summarizing the key information and findings both in narrative and graphic forms. The primary method of data analysis was based on a comparative analysis. This method enabled the analysts to examine, compare and conduct an in-depth analysis and synthesis to identify similarities and patterns or differences and challenges.

Data interpretation—making sense of the results—was crucial. Accurately analyzing data, identifying trends and determining the real-life situation accurately was central to reaching representative conclusions and recommendations to meet the needs of affected communities. Analyzing outcomes, especially for quantitative data requiring mathematical manipulation, can be initially challenging particularly if advanced software packages are used. It is, however, more important to use basic statistical tools instead of more sophisticated ones because as long as the information is accurate, usable and accessible, people are unlikely to be interested in the method used to produce it. That was the reason IMAS produced a standard summary statistical report for analysis.

In addition to the report provided by IMAS, the transcripts and audiovisual recordings of the focus group discussions were examined. The transcripts accurately portrayed the discussions and the ongoing development of ideas as they contained half sentences, unfinished thoughts and clarifying questions; however, the transcripts did not reveal the complete nature of the discussions as nonverbal communication, gestures, and behavioral responses were not reflected. In addition, the way participants used words and the tone with which words were used are important sources of information and can change the interpretation of a statement.

Thus, for the purpose of this analysis, the audiovisual recordings were examined as well. The intensity of expression of participants was an important indicator for understanding their perceptions of mass media. From this perspective, it should be noted that moods and emotions varied as different aspects of the topic were discussed. The focus groups provided moments of



formality, tension, hilarity and mild hostility; the analysis and interpretation have to take into account the nature and sources of participants' emotional reactions and expressions.

As with other types of data, the nature of the analyses of the focus group discussions is determined by the research questions and the purpose for which the data are collected. For our exploratory research, a descriptive narrative that follows the logic and chronology of the focus group discussions is appropriate. The questioning route was designed to develop the subject in a logical way; most of the discussions followed this logic which allowed participants to develop their ideas.

The examination and analysis of the three sources—the IMAS report, the transcripts, and the audiovisual materials—showed how group members collaborated on some issues, how they achieved consensus (or failed to) and how they constructed (or didn't) shared meanings about the role of the media. Thus, the participants in the focus groups interacted in a way that is very relevant for this research. With a rather unexpected frequency, the participants used expressions like "As my colleague said," "As he/she affirmed," "I agree with," "The same," "Me to," "I also," and other similar statements. It is crucial to specify, however, that the participants did not agree or arrive at a consensus as to whether media is trustworthy or professional; rather, most of these phrases were used to express a critical attitude toward the mass media. There was a general acceptance and implicit consensus that it is good to be critical of mass media, to display a critical attitude and to show skills for critically analyzing media content. Some participants were more critical than others, so they played a certain role in shaping the discussion. This interaction brought them to a new level as media consumers that did not necessarily correspond to their real levels. Nonetheless, this interaction is not without significance as it highlights the participants' ideal behavior as media consumers, i.e., to be a critical media consumer. The next section of this report analyses how this ideal behavior is approximated by different patterns of media consumption of sociopolitical news.

The emphasis of the focus group as a method is on the subjective, idiosyncratic perceptions and motivations of the individual respondent. Thus, the results of the qualitative part of the research are subjective and reflect only the opinions of participants, although if corroborated by the quantitative data obtained from the national survey, they can be interpreted as general trends for the media audience in the Republic of Moldova.

## 3. SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Questionnaires

- Television was by far the most important source of sociopolitical information with 67% of respondents using it as their preferred source followed by Internet/websites at 26% and radio at 6%.
- Regarding trust, the findings yielded comparable results: Television was the most trusted source of sociopolitical information for 68% of respondents while Internet/websites were considered the most trusted source by 22%, radio by 4% and newspapers by only 2%.
- Regarding frequency of consultation, on a daily basis television was consulted by 68%, Internet/news sites by 36%, radio by 29% and social networks by 22%.
- As far as duration is concerned, 24% of respondents allocated less than 1 hour for looking for, reading or watching sociopolitical news. The majority (61%) spent 1–2 hours per day for this purpose, while 14% spent 3 hours or more per day. Mostly younger participants with secondary or less education allocated less than 1 hour per day for this purpose.
- Among the sources preferred for news programs, three channels enjoyed comparable popularity: public station Moldova 1 and private stations Prime TV and Jurnal TV. While the first two channels were preferred by older respondents (over 45), Jurnal TV was the most popular with younger participants.
- Romanian language media were the major sources of sociopolitical information for 52% of respondents (as either an exclusive or more frequent source); however, the Russian language played a significant role as well as 19% considered it their exclusive or more frequent source and an additional 29% claimed they consulted media in both languages equally. From a different perspective, approximately one-third of the population consulted media in only one language (23% Romanian and 10% Russian).
- The penetration of information available in Russian is strengthened by the existing proportion of Russian-based news programs: Of the 15 most popular television channels, 11 air their newscasts in Russian and Romanian (exceptions are Jurnal TV, Pro TV, Canal 2 and the local branch of Romanian public broadcaster TVR Moldova).
- The percentage of people preferring sources of information in Romanian was pulled upward by people under age 30 with higher educa-

tion. As the age of the respondent increased, so did the share of people who preferred information in Russian.

- Popular sources of information had their specific audiences. Occupationally inactive people over age 45 preferred television while persons who were older but who had higher education and were from small towns were the prominent public for the written press. Occupationally active youth with higher education from municipalities informed themselves online.
- In all, 11% considered themselves to be very informed, and 41% were quite satisfied with their information level; this perception increased significantly with the level of education. On the other hand, 43% considered themselves poorly informed and 5% said they were not informed at all, a perception that was clearly present among ethnic minority groups (66%).
- The primary roles of the media are to inform, to monitor and to educate as reflected in respondents' multiple choice answers. According to 75% of respondents, the media should primarily present all events that are taking place while 49% thought that the media should monitor the authorities and 40% claimed that the media's role is to explain the world around us (40%). A noteworthy 43% of respondents said it was important that media outlets exercise their own editorial policies when selecting events to present compared with 75% of respondents who expected media to present all events.
- While the respondents were divided in terms of satisfaction with the coverage of domestic affairs (51% very much or a lot vs 46% a little or very little), there was more visible dissatisfaction with the presentation of international sociopolitical information as 43% were satisfied vs 54% who were dissatisfied.
- Overall, a selective approach both in terms of showing only certain events (71%) and also in terms of showing a distorted picture of those events (67%) was considered the main professional problem in media coverage, both in Moldovan and in foreign media. Additionally, the omnipresence of political topics at the expense of civic news was seen as problematic by 59% of respondents.
- Most of the respondents (62%) stated they were familiar with the term manipulation. This share was even higher among Internet users, people with secondary or higher education, people under age 45 and those living in municipalities. Among those familiar with manipulation, 98% considered it a bad thing.
- While 70% of respondents thought that the media manipulate, only 4% considered themselves to be manipulated by the media.
- Approximately three quarters of the sample (77%) thought Moldovan media use propaganda or manipulate frequently followed by the media

in Russia (60%), Romania (50%) and Ukraine (48%). The shares for Western media were much lower since they are followed less frequently.

- The survey results revealed a relatively strong contradictory message: The Russian media was the most trusted by 46% of the sample while the media of all other countries combined was the most trusted by 29%; however, Russian media was also thought to have more severe professional problems and to be the second most manipulative (both after Moldovan media).
- In their answers, some respondents—particularly when assessing the overall picture, satisfaction or trust in media of respective countries—reflected whether media output (in particular Russian output) corresponded to their own ideologies and perceptions and understanding of the world in general rather than whether it followed professional criteria for coverage. With more specific questions, however, a more accurate assessment of media performance including adherence to professional standards was obtained.

### **Focus groups**

- A comparison of the data from the focus groups discussions with the data from the national survey confirmed and validated the findings of both and legitimated the interpretation of the opinions of participants in the focus groups as trends representative of the entire population of the Republic of Moldova.
- When choosing sources of sociopolitical information, the participants claimed to take into consideration the following criteria: 1) language, 2) the way the information was presented, 3) family traditions, 4) recommendations from friends, 5) owners of the mass media outlet, 6) topics presented and 7) the professionalism of journalists.
- The Russian speaking participants firstly took into account the language in which information was disseminated while for the Romanian speaking participants language was not a determinant as most of them consulted both Romanian and Russian language sources. The younger participants mostly relied on recommendations from friends, mainly on social media, when choosing what sources to follow. Older participants chose sources taking into account the habits and traditions of the family.
- “Foreign media” had different meanings for the participants. For some foreign media was from other countries while for others foreign was mass media either local or geographically more distant that was biased and tendentially reflected reality in the Republic of Moldova. For other participants, only mass media that was not of Romanian or Russian origin could be properly foreign.

- The focus group participants considered that most of the media they accessed and consulted offered biased news that did not correctly report on sociopolitical events, so they constantly needed to look for alternative sources and to compare the information received from several (usually two or three) of them.
- The media audience as represented by the participants in the focus group discussions had the following plausible and adequate criteria for identifying a trustworthy news item: objectivity, neutrality, correctness, video and photographic material, proof, a relevant and adequate title, documentation based on several sources, details, the presentation of several points of view and respect for the professional ethics of journalism.
- Manipulation and propaganda were defined by participants as information that is not impartial and is used primarily to influence an audience and further an agenda, often by presenting facts selectively to encourage a particular synthesis or by using messages to produce an emotional rather than a rational response to the information presented. The difference between manipulation and propaganda was mainly seen as a matter of degree and intensity with propaganda the more intense and direct attempt to influence the audience and to impose a certain idea.
- Most of the participants in the focus groups, both men and women from rural and urban areas, considered that Moldovan mass media often use manipulation and propaganda in news coverage. Opinions differed on the use of these instruments in foreign media. Most participants considered that the Russian media use manipulation and propaganda more often compared to US, EU and Romanian media; however, some participants believed that the US media use these tools as frequently as the Russian media only less aggressively.
- The participants had certain expectations from mass media. If they could send a message to news reporters they would say the following: 1) present reality objectively and independently; 2) reflect events and the current problems in a timely way; 3) be transparent, unbiased and professional; 4) be honest with themselves and less corrupt; 5) first be humans, then journalists; 6) present more points of view and 7) take into account that they are responsible for promoting values in society.



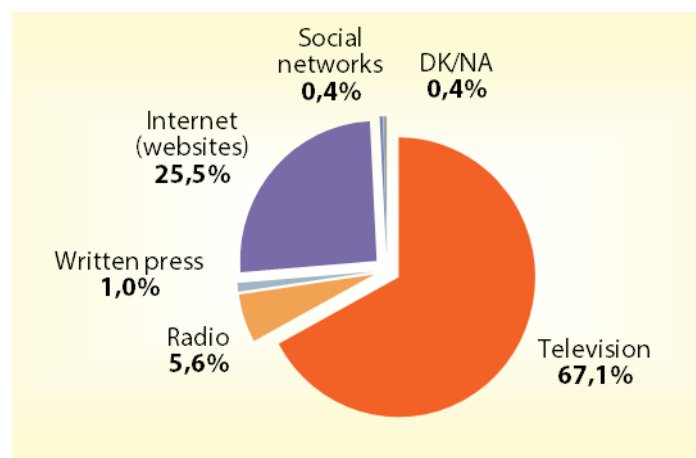
# 4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

## 4.1. Questionnaires (quantitative analysis)

### *Socio-political news reports*

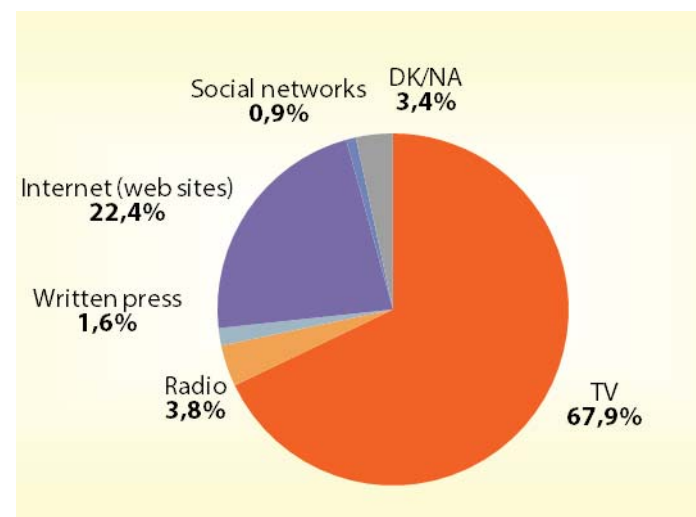
**Figure 1: Answers to question 5: When looking for news on a sociopolitical topic, what is the media source that you prefer?**

(Percentage of the total sample of 1137 respondents)



**Figure 2: Answers to question 11: When looking for news on a sociopolitical topic, what is the mass media source you trust the most?**

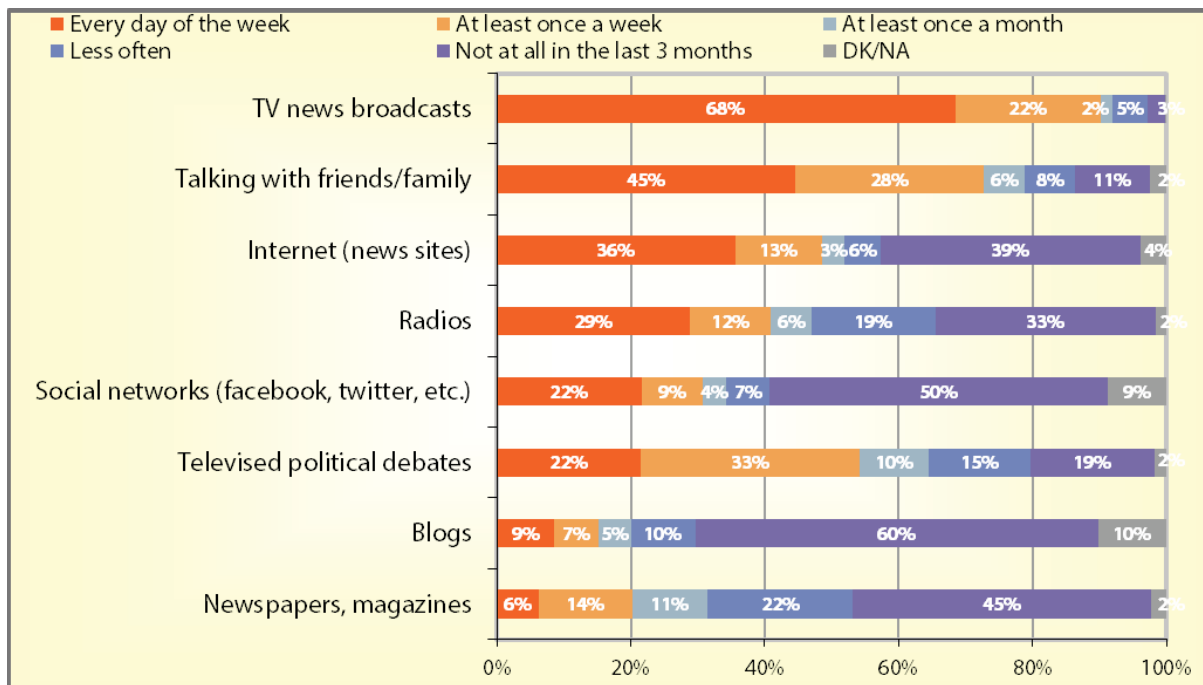
(Percentage of the total sample of 1137 respondents)



When asked to offer a single answer on the source of sociopolitical information (Figure 1), television was the most preferred source by 67.1% of respondents followed by the Internet (25.5%) and radio (5.6%). The least consulted source was print media (1%). The answers revealed a similar pattern concerning the most trusted source (Figure 2) with television mentioned by 67.9% followed by the Internet (22.4%) and radio (3.8%).

**Figure 3: Answers to question 4: People follow sociopolitical topics in various sources. How often do you use each of the sources below to obtain such information?**

(Percentage of the total sample of 1137 respondents)



Television remained the dominant source of information for the sample with 90% of respondents consulting its news programs at least once a week—68% on a daily basis and 22% on a weekly basis (Figure 3). Discussions with family/friends followed at 73% (45% daily, 28% weekly) and televised political debates were the third most important source at 55% (22% daily and 33% weekly). Other sources of sociopolitical information were the Internet at 49% (36% daily and 13% weekly), radio at 41% (29% daily and 12% weekly), social networks at 31% (22% and 9%) and lastly newspapers/magazines at 20% (6% and 14%) and blogs at 16% (9% daily and 7% weekly).

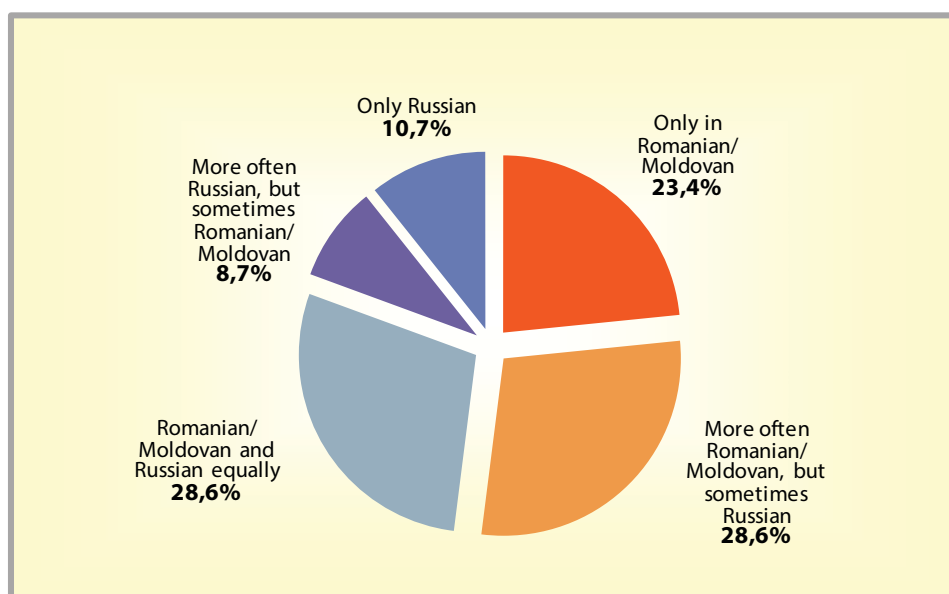
As Table 3 shows, sources of information have their specific publics. Television is preferred especially by occupationally inactive people over age 45. Persons who are even older but who have higher education and are from small towns are the dominant public for the written press. Occupationally active youth with higher education from municipalities, the ones who consider that media has manipulative powers, inform themselves primarily online.

**Table 3: Sources of information by demographic group**

Specific group	Frequent source of information							
	TV News Broadcasts	TV Talk Shows	Radio	Newspaper, magazines	Internet (news sites)	Blogs	Social networks	Discussions with friends/family
Men			■					
18–29						■	■	
Under 45					■			
Over 45	■	■						
Over 60			■	■				
Higher education		■		■	■	■	■	
Employed					■	■	■	
Unemployed	■	■		■				
Ethnic Moldovans		■					■	
Ethnic minorities			■					
Municipalities					■	■	■	
Medium-sized towns		■	■					■
Small towns				■				■
Rural			■					

**Figure 4: Answers to question 6: When you search for news on a sociopolitical topic, which language do you prefer?**

(Percentage of the total sample of 1137 respondents)



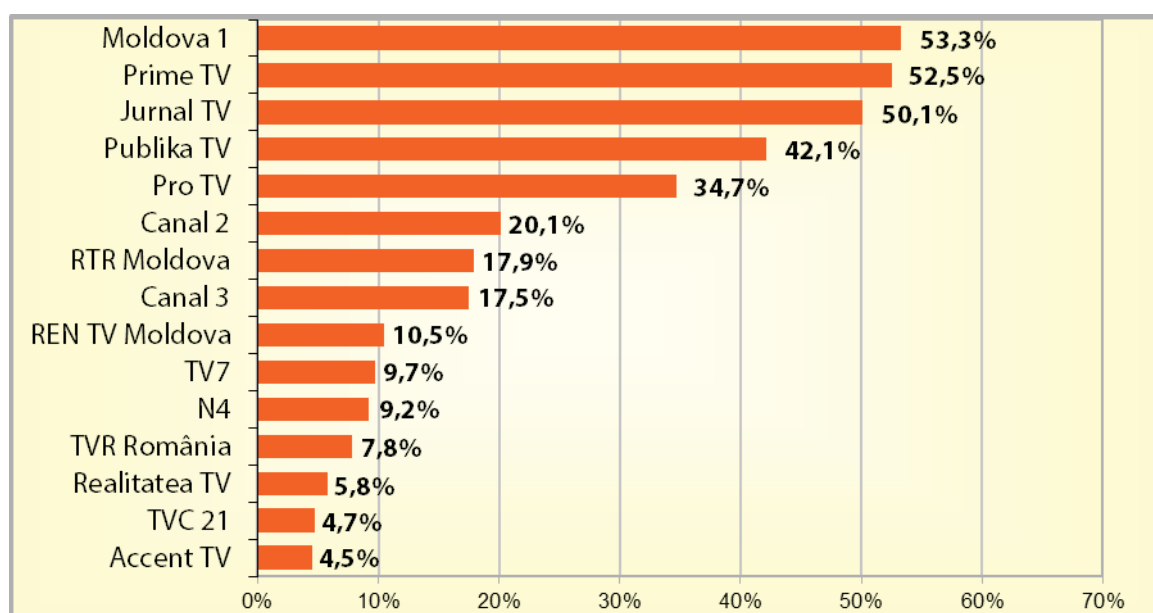
A number of very important conclusions can be drawn from Figure 4. Romanian language media are the major source of sociopolitical information (for 52% of respondents it was the exclusive or more frequent source); however, the Russian language media play a significant role as well as 19.4% considered it as their exclusive or more frequent source and an additional 57.2% consulted media in both languages equally or sometimes consulted Russian media. Taking all three segments together, 76.6% of respondents were influenced by Russian language media.

The percentage of people preferring sources of information in Romanian was pulled upward by people under age 30 with higher education. As the age of the respondent increased, so did the share of people who preferred information in Russian.

In this context it is noteworthy that of the 15 television channels the respondents mentioned in the survey, 14 of them broadcast their news programs in Romanian (the only exception is the local branch of Russian state broadcaster RTR Moldova) while 11 channels air their newscasts in Russian and Romanian (exceptions are Jurnal TV, Pro TV, Canal 2 and local branch of Romanian public broadcaster TVR Moldova).

**Figure 5: Answers to question 7: On what TV channels do you usually watch the news?**

(Percentage of the total sample of 1137 respondents)



The three most popular TV channels on average were public station Moldova 1 closely followed by private stations Prime TV and Jurnal TV (Figure 5). Demographically, the popularity of Moldova 1 as well as of Prime TV gradually increased with older segments of the population reaching its highest viewership in the age category over 60 years; however, for Prime TV the shares for this category and for its average viewership were similar (59.0% vs 52.5%) while Moldova 1 was watched by 71.1% of respondents over age 60 vs its average figure of 53.3%. An even starker difference appeared when comparing the highest and lowest viewership figures between the age categories 60+ (71.1%) and 18–29 (32.9%).

This was the greatest difference among all the channels. In fact, Moldova 1 is the 5th most watched tv by young people – 18-29.

Moldova 1 was much more likely to be preferred by women over 45 with a medium or low level of education, by persons who do not work and by people living in rural areas or in small or medium-sized cities. Prime TV attracted a significantly larger share of people identifying with ethnic minorities. On the other hand, Jurnal TV was the most popular channel among the younger and middle age groups (18–29 and 30–44) and also attracted a large number of viewers in urban areas as it was the most watched channel in bigger municipal centers.

**Table 4: Answers to question 8.4: What are the news programs you usually watch on Moldova 1? (%)**

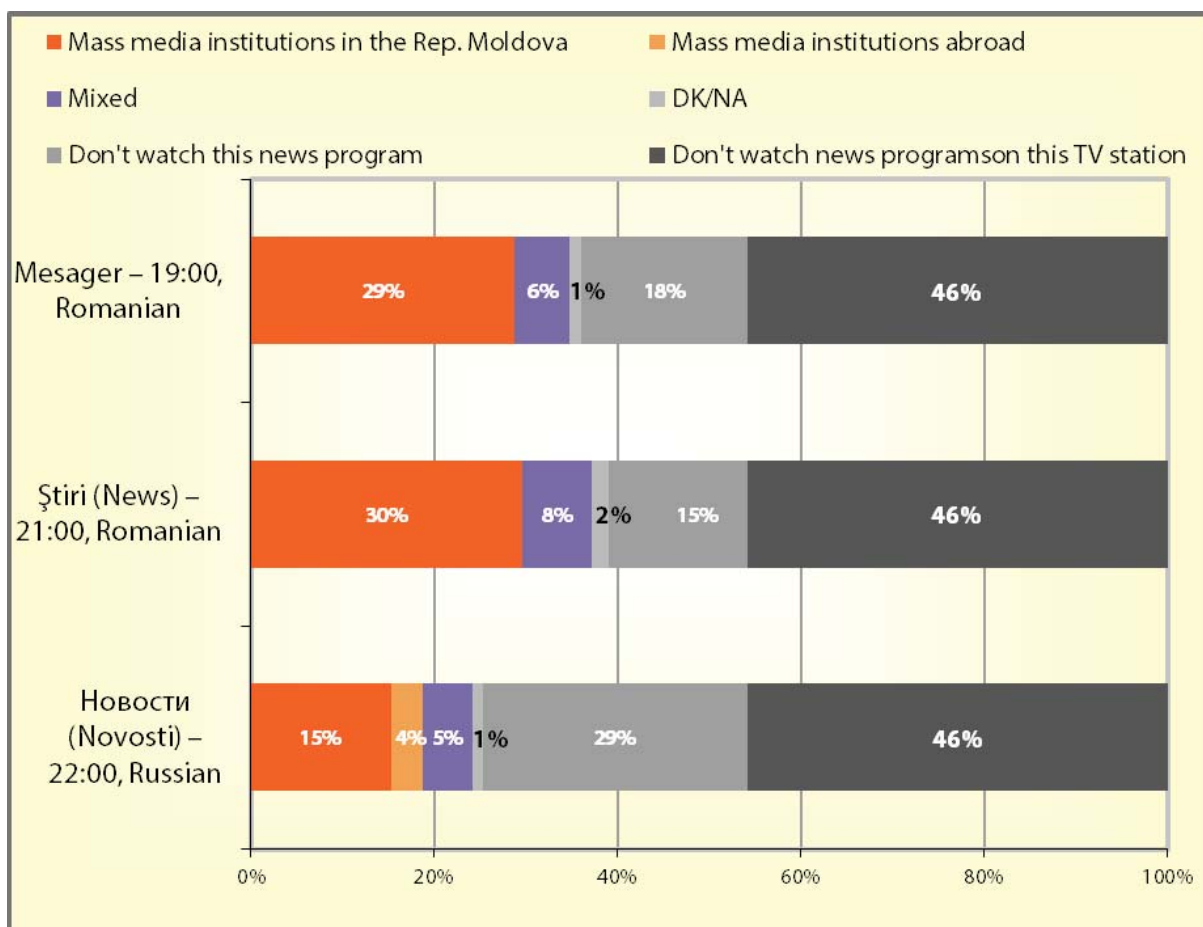
(Percentage of those who said they are watching news on Moldova 1, 616 respondents)

Variable	Group	Mesager at 19:00, Romanian	Stiri at 21:00, Romanian	Новости (Novosti) at 22:00, Russian
<b>Sex</b>	Male	63.8	70.7	45.6
	Female	69.0	73.3	48.0
<b>Age</b>	18–29	66.4	67.9	51.5
	30–44	66.0	72.5	45.1
	45–59	67.9	69.0	49.4
	Over 60	65.8	78.3	42.2
<b>Education</b>	Incomplete secondary education	62.8	70.9	50.0
	Secondary/vocational school	67.5	76.4	54.5
	Lyceum/post-lyceum/college	66.4	73.3	45.3
	Higher education	67.8	67.8	42.0
<b>Occupation</b>	Employed	63.5	72.2	46.8
	Temporarily unemployed	70.8	58.5	50.0
	Unemployed	67.7	77.3	45.4
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Moldovan	66.9	71.7	49.2
	Other	64.6	74.7	31.6
<b>Residence</b>	Municipality	64.1	68.8	53.1
	Town > 14,000 inhabitants	61.2	70.1	40.3
	Town < 14,000 inhabitants	65.1	74.4	60.5
	Rural	68.5	73.3	44.4
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>66.6</b>	<b>72.1</b>	<b>46.9</b>



**Figure 6: Answers to question 9.4: In your opinion, are the news programs on Moldova 1 made by a media institution in Moldova or abroad or do they have a mixed content?**

(Percentage of the total sample of 1137 respondents)



As already mentioned in the commentary on Figure 5, the popularity of news programs on public station Moldova 1 grew with older segments of the population with the highest viewership (71.1%) among respondents over 60 years of age. Table 4 shows that this age group primarily focused on the Romanian newscast at 21:00 as did other age groups making this news program the most popular of all those mentioned in the survey. Respondents with a secondary education living mostly in small towns and in rural areas also mostly watched this news program.

The Russian edition of this newscast was the least watched news program on Moldova 1; however, it is interesting that the profile of viewers was different from that watching the program in Romanian. This newscast accounted for the highest figures among younger generations (18–29) whereas it had the lowest viewership among respondents over age 60. Viewers predominantly had a secondary or lower education and lived mostly in small towns and were surprisingly significantly more Romanian speaking viewers than viewers of Russian origin (the news at 21:00 was watched by more viewers from ethnic minorities). Additional information concerning the news program in Russian suggests that approximately one-third of respondents (29%) was not certain whether the program was produced in Moldova (as is the case) or abroad (Figure 6).

**Table 5: Answers to question 8.6: What are the news programs you usually watch on Prime TV?**

(Percentage of those who said they are watching news on Prime TV, 600 respondents)

Variable	Group	Primele Stiri at 18:00, Russian	Primele Stiri at 21:00, Romanian	Время at 21:40, Russian
<b>Sex</b>	Male	52.2	7.3	45.3
	Female	59.3	7.8	52.5
<b>Age</b>	18–29	57.5	76.1	48.5
	30–44	59.1	75.3	53.2
	45–59	56.9	78.1	51.9
	Over 60	50.7	82.2	42.8
<b>Education</b>	Incomplete secondary education	49.3	83.1	46.5
	Secondary/vocational school	53.5	82.9	50.4
	Lyceum/post-lyceum/college	57.3	75.3	50.6
	Higher education	58.8	75.6	46.9
<b>Occupation</b>	Employed	59.7	78.5	51.1
	Temporarily unemployed	53.7	78.7	56.5
	Unemployed	54.6	76.7	44.2
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Moldovan	57.6	76.9	50.4
	Other	48.5	83.5	43.3
<b>Residence</b>	Municipality	59.1	71.5	48.2
	Town > 14,000 inhabitants	50.8	73.0	44.4
	Town < 14,000 inhabitants	64.1	64.1	46.2
	Rural	54.8	82.8	50.7
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>56.0</b>	<b>78.0</b>	<b>49.2</b>

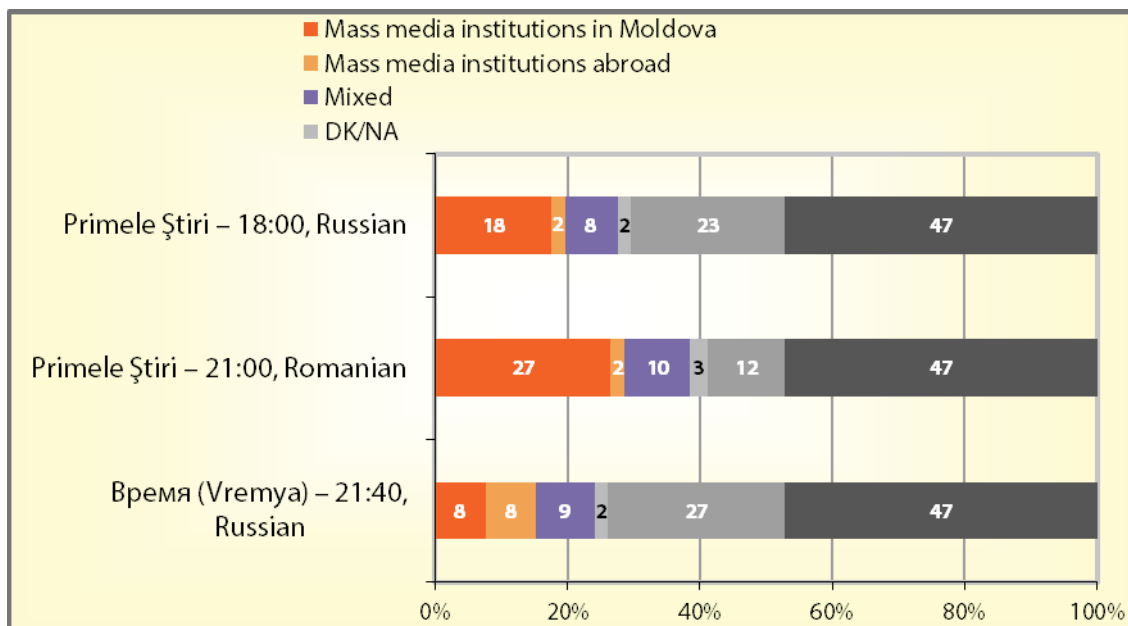
As with Moldova 1, the popularity of news programs on Prime TV grew with older segments of the population with the highest viewership figures among respondents over age 60 of whom 59% watched news programs on this channel. Table 5 shows that this age category primarily focused on the Romanian newscast at 21:00. Despite two news programs aired in Russian (one indigenous production at 18:00 and a rebroadcast from Russian channel First at 21:40), the Romanian newscast was the most watched among other age categories as well. Respondents with a secondary or lower education living in rural places mostly also watched this program.

The Russian editions of the news accounted for higher viewership among the age group 30–44 while the lowest figures were for viewers over 60 (similar to Moldova 1). Viewers of the 21:40 newscast produced in Russia were predominantly living in rural areas with varying levels of education. Surprisingly, for both Russian news programs, ethnic Moldovans composed a significantly higher portion of viewers than those of Russian origin while the Romanian version of the news was watched by more viewers from ethnic minorities.

Additional information concerning the Russian news programs is provided in Figure 7 which shows that 23% and 27% of respondents respectively were not certain whether the programs were produced in Moldova (as is the case for the 18:00 newscast) or abroad (as is the case for the 21:40 news program).

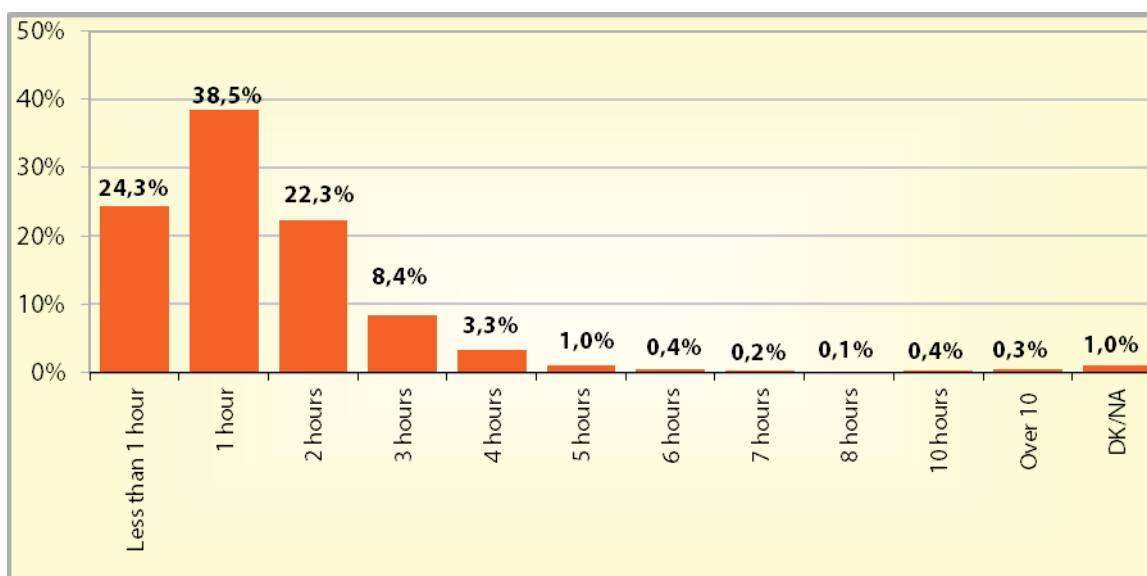
**Figure 7: Answers to question 9.6: In your opinion, are the news programs on Prime TV made by a media institution in Moldova or abroad, or does it have a mixed content?**

(Percentage of the total sample of 1137 respondents)



**Figure 8: Answers to question 10: How many hours do you spend searching for, reading and watching news or information on socio-political topics in a day?**

(Percentage of the total sample of 1137 respondents)

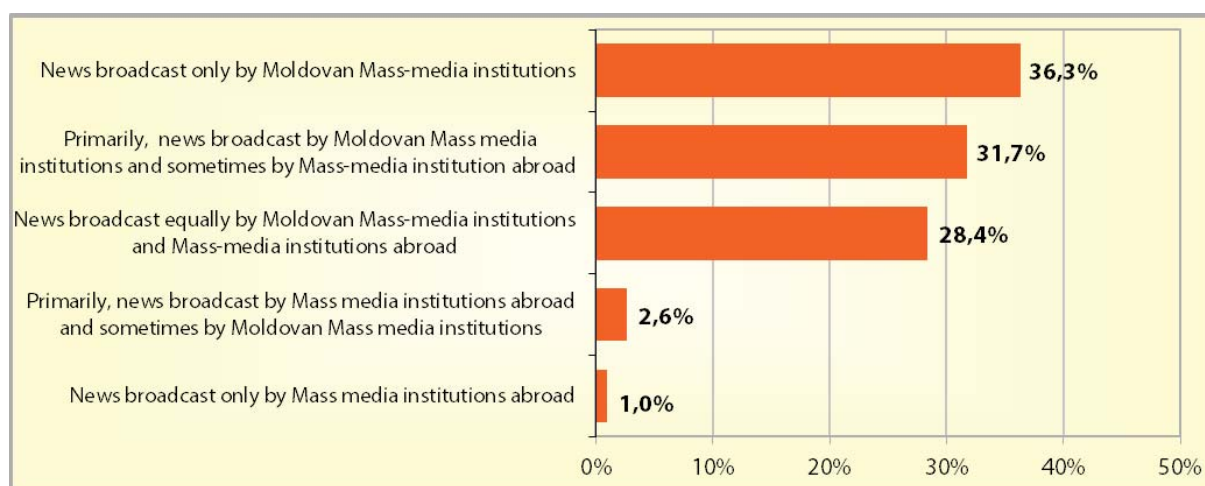


Most of the respondents spent up to 2 hours looking for, reading or watching socio-political news. While the majority (38.5%) spent approximately 1 hour, and 22% - 2 hours, there is about a quarter (24%) of population that allocate less than one hour for this purpose.

Those who usually allocated less than 1 hour per day were most likely to be younger with secondary or less education, people employed and ethnic minorities in rural areas. People who invested from 2–3 hours or more were generally over 60 years of age with higher educations, unemployed people, ethnic Moldovans and residents of urban areas.

**Figure 9: Answers to question 13: When you are interested in sociopolitical news regardless of the source you use (TV, radio, print press, Internet/websites, social networks), what type of broadcast do you prefer?**

(Percentage of the total sample of 1137 respondents)



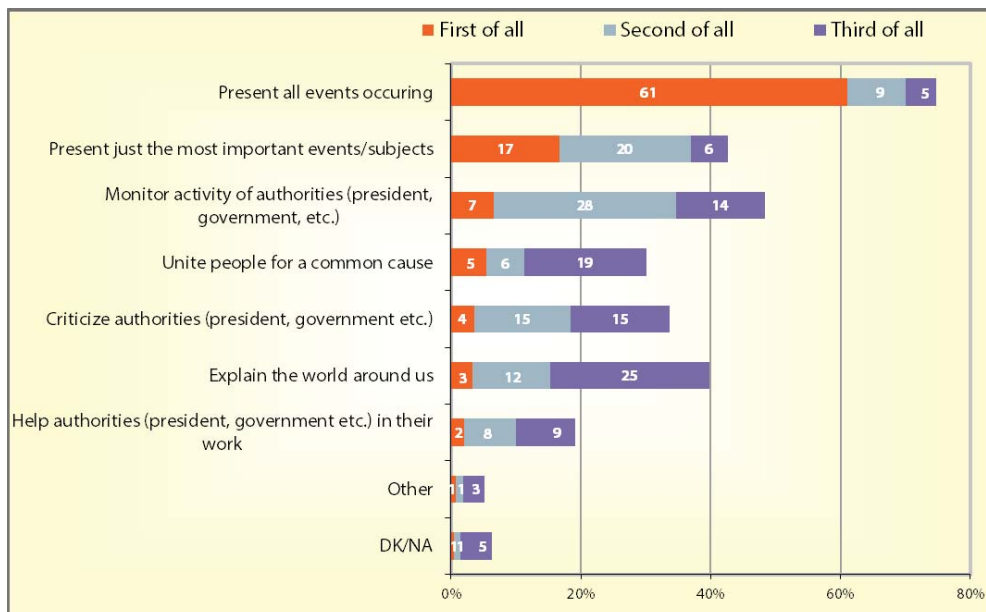
In comparison with question 6 (Figure 4) that dealt with respondents' language preferences when searching for sociopolitical information, this question was not limited to Romanian and Russian, thus the results are naturally broader though not significantly different. More than one-third of respondents (36.3%) claimed they consulted only Moldovan media which is in line with data in Figure 4 when a combined 34.1% claimed to consult only Romanian or Russian language information.

Question 6 findings indicated that news in Romanian was the exclusive or more frequent source for 52% while news in Russian was the exclusive or more frequent source for 19%. The findings in question 13, however, suggest that a good portion of those newscasts could be generated by media based in Romania or Russia as 28.4% got their news equally from institutions in Moldova and abroad and 31.7% indicated that foreign media was a source sometimes.

## Role of the Media and Consumer satisfaction

**Figure 10: Answers to question 3: What, in your opinion, is the role of the media?**

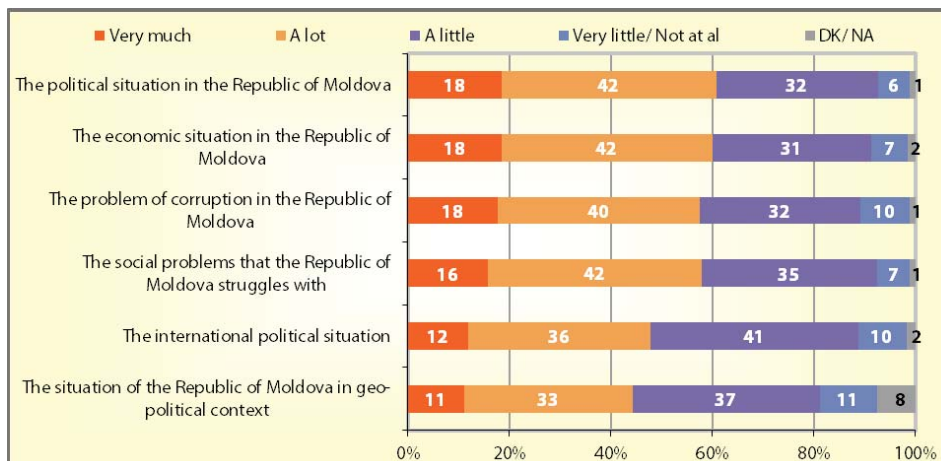
(Percentage of the total sample of 1137 respondents)



According to the respondents, the primary role of the media is to inform by presenting all events taking place (75%); the other two major media functions are to monitor authorities (49%) and to educate by explaining the world around us (40%). A noteworthy 43% of respondents, however, considered it important that media outlets exercise their own editorial policies when selecting events to present, i.e., showing only important ones, compared with the 75% who expected all events to be presented with media serving mechanically as a transmitter of information.

**Figure 11: Answers to question 12: On a scale of 1 to 4 with 1 very little/not at all and 4 very much, please evaluate how much the news on sociopolitical topics helps you to better understand the following.**

(Percentage of the total sample of 1137 respondents)



**Figure 12: Answers to question 15: On a scale of 1 to 4 with 1 very little/not at all and 4 very much, please evaluate how much you like the way Moldovan media presents Moldovan and international sociopolitical events.**

(Percentage of those who consulted sociopolitical news in the past 3 months: 1124 respondents)

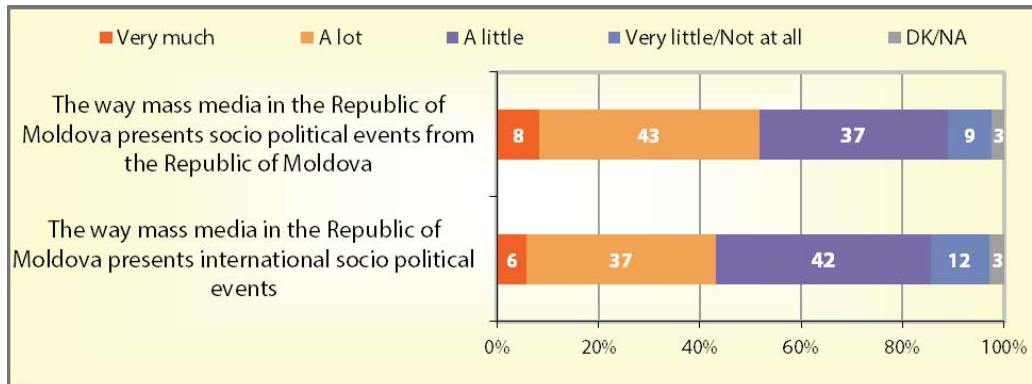
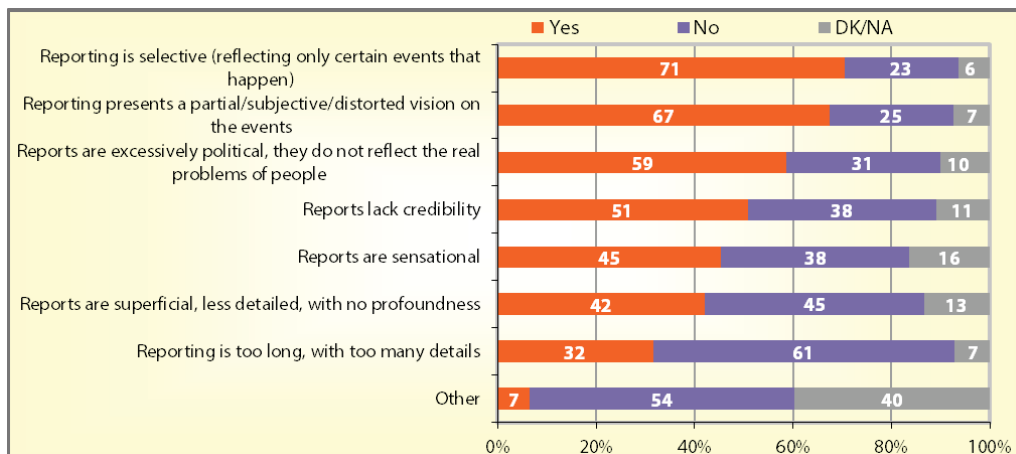


Figure 11 assesses the informative nature of news on specific topics while Figure 12 assesses overall satisfaction with media coverage. In Figure 11, most respondents (58%–60%) stated that Moldovan media do help them to better understand major domestic topics including politics, the economy and social issues though only 48% agreed that was true for international political topics and just 44% for Moldova’s position in the geopolitical context.

Discontent with the coverage of international affairs is also reflected in the overall assessment of Moldovan media in Figure 12 with 54% expressing their dissatisfaction while only 43% were satisfied. Interestingly, though approximately 60% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the informative content of domestic reports (Figure 11), the proportion was discernibly lower who said they were satisfied overall at 51.7% (45.8% were not satisfied). Dissatisfaction with the coverage of both domestic and international news was found mostly among ethnic minorities, respondents in bigger towns, among people with college or higher education and in the 18–29 age category.

**Figure 13: Answers to question 16: What do you consider to be the biggest problems/difficulties for mass media in the Republic of Moldova in presenting sociopolitical events in our country? (%)**

(Percentage of those who consulted sociopolitical news in the past 3 months: 1124 respondents)





Overall, respondents thought the main problem was the selective approach both in terms of showing only certain events (71%) and also in terms of showing a distorted picture of those events (67%) (Figure13). Additionally, the omnipresence of political topics at the expense of social ones was a problem for 59% of respondents. The selective approach and distortion were considered problematic across the board, but respondents with college or higher education, in the 45–59 age group and living in bigger towns expressed the highest level of discontent with excessively political news. Those least bothered by distortion were those with incomplete secondary education and ethnic minorities.

**Figure 14: Answers to question 30: Why do you prefer a specific sociopolitical news source?**

(Percentage of those who consulted Moldovan and international sociopolitical news sources: 724 respondents)

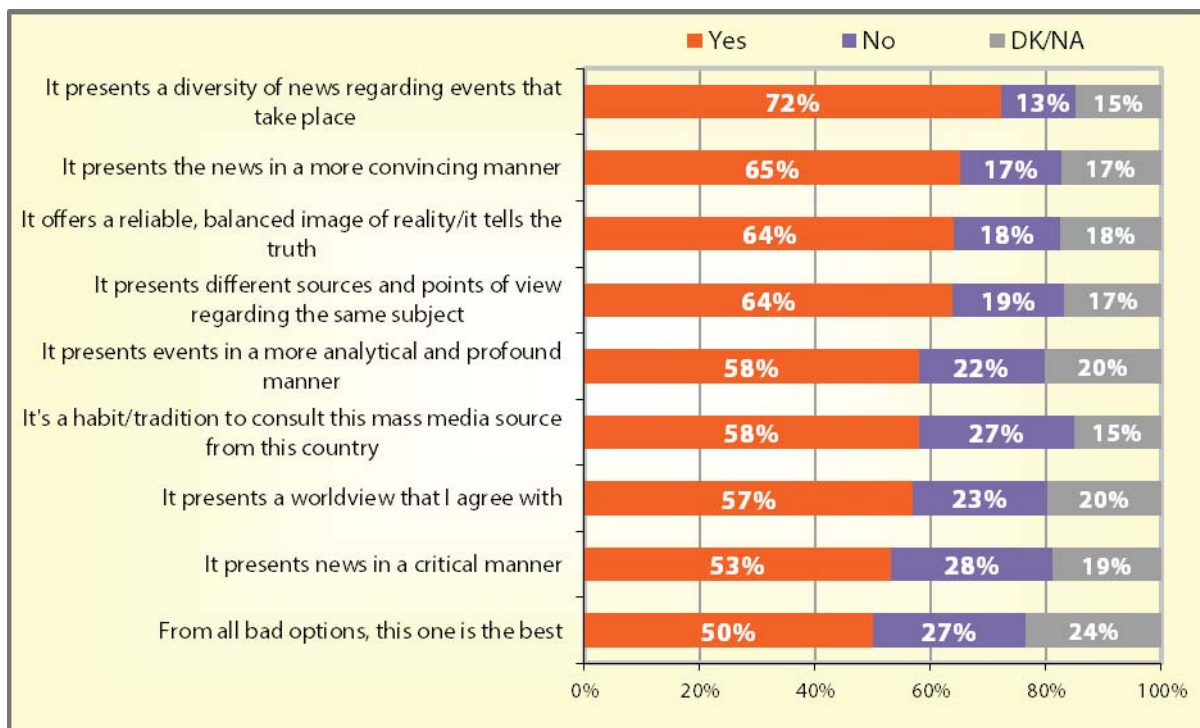


Figure 14 shows that overall, the dominant preference was for presenting a diversity of events rather than for a reliable presentation of reality (reason #3) or for a more analytical coverage of the topics (reason #5). Noteworthy is the second most important reason: the manner in which the stories are reported, in other words, if the news is presented convincingly. This reason was particularly important for ethnic minorities, for the age group 45–59 and for respondents living in small towns.

## Perceptions of foreign media

**Figure 15: Answers to question 17: What is the main reason you seek sociopolitical news broadcasts on media outlets from abroad?**

(Percentage of those who consulted Moldovan and international sociopolitical news sources, 724 respondents)

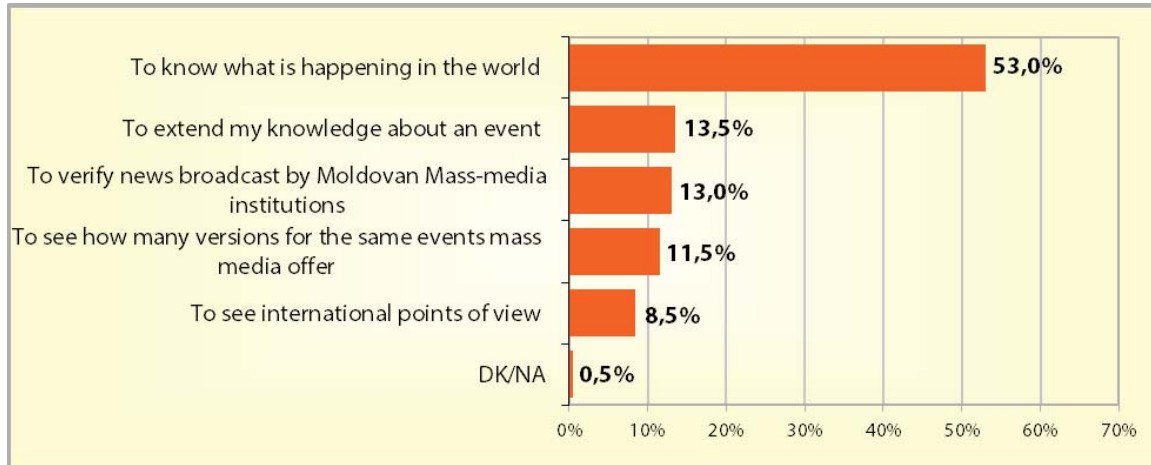
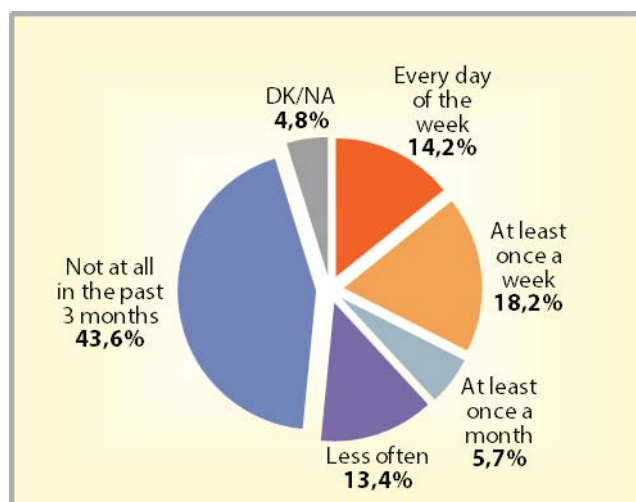


Figure 15 indicates that respondents primarily consult foreign media out of general interest rather than a need to consult different points of view or to expand knowledge about a specific event. In Figure 13 a total of 67% of respondents indicated distorted information was a problem, but only 64.4% (724 respondents out of 1124 respondents) made the additional effort to gain an international perspective, and of this group, 26.5% sought a complete picture (reasons 2 and 3 in Figure 15).

Demographically, respondents from bigger towns and municipalities and somewhat surprisingly those with secondary or less education and respondents over 45 sought to extend their knowledge about an event or to verify the news presented by Moldovan media. The youngest age group (18-29) had the least interest in consulting foreign media.

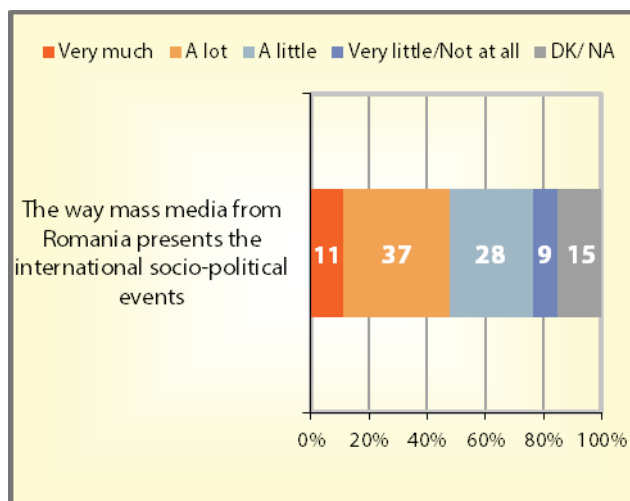
**Figure 16: Answers to question 18: When you consult sociopolitical news presented by media outlets in Romania, how often do you do so to obtain information? (%)**

(Percentage of those who mentioned that have consulted sociopolitical news presented by media from Moldova and media abroad, 724 respondents)



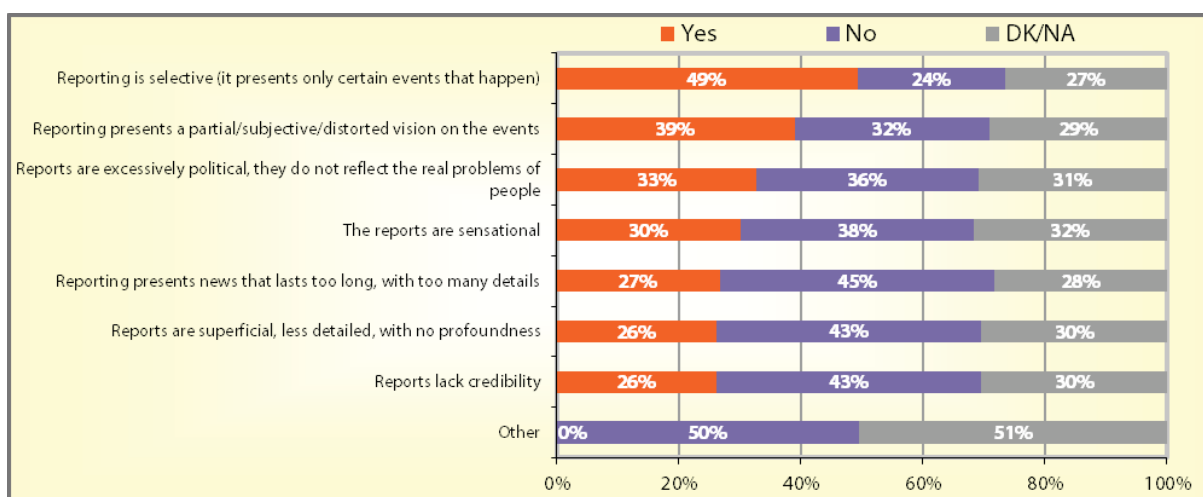
**Figure 17: Answers to question 19: On a scale of 1 to 4 with 1 very little/not at all, and 4 very much, please evaluate how much you like the way Romanian mass media present international sociopolitical events. (%)**

(Percentage of those who mentioned that have consulted sociopolitical news presented by media from Romania, 408 respondents)



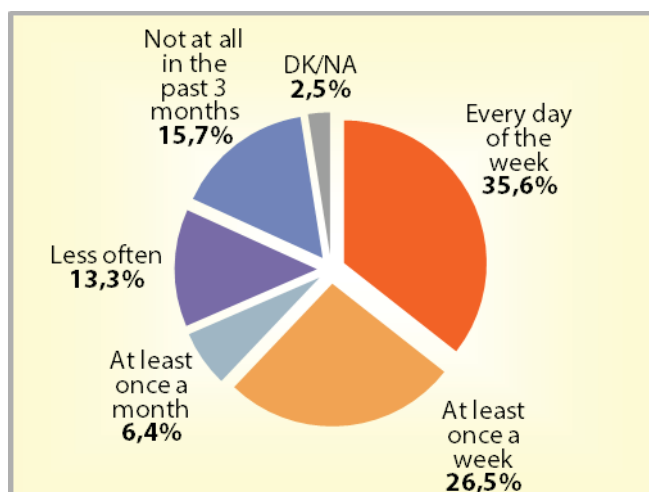
**Figure 18: Answers to question 20: What do you consider to be the biggest problems/difficulties for media outlets in Romania when presenting international sociopolitical events? (%)**

(Percentage of those who mentioned that have consulted sociopolitical news presented by media from Romania, 408 respondents)



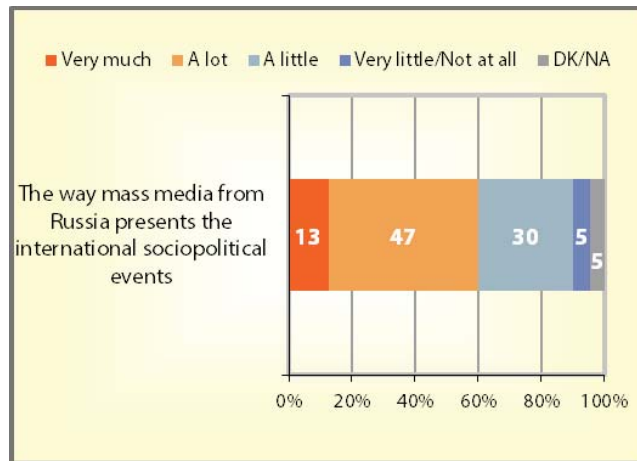
**Figure 19: Answers to question 21: When you consult sociopolitical news presented by media outlets in Russia, how often do you do so in order to obtain information?**

(Percentage of those who mentioned that have consulted sociopolitical news presented by media from Moldova and media abroad, 724 respondents)



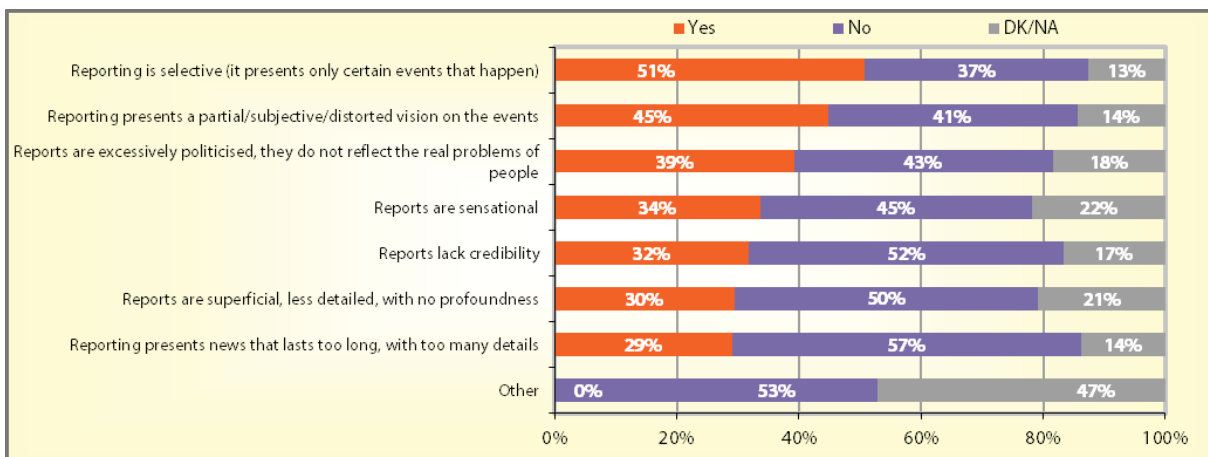
**Figure 20: Answers to question 22: On a scale of 1 to 4 with 1 very little/not at all and 4 very much, please evaluate how much you like the way Russian mass media presents international sociopolitical events.**

(Percentage of those who mentioned that have consulted sociopolitical news presented by media from Russia, 610 respondents)



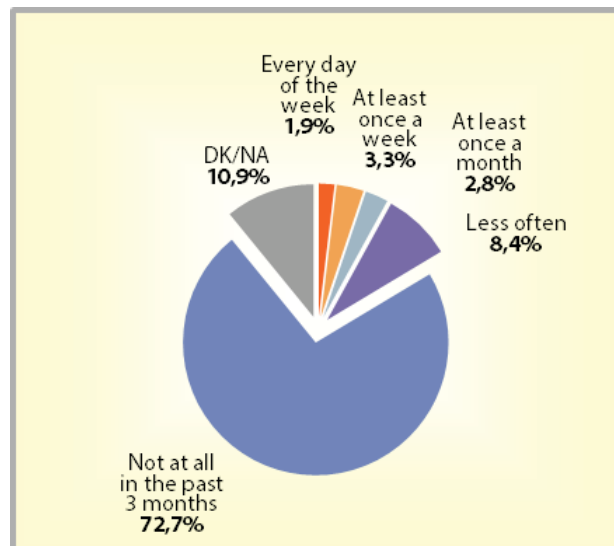
**Figure 21: Answers to question 23: What do you consider to be the biggest problems/difficulties for media outlets in Russia when presenting international sociopolitical events?**

(Percentage of those who mentioned that have consulted sociopolitical news presented by media from Russia, 610 respondents)



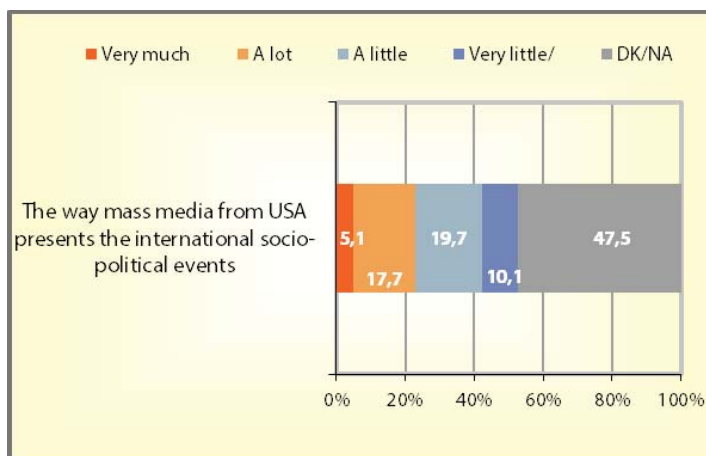
**Figure 22: Answers to question 24: When you consult sociopolitical news presented by media outlets in the US, how often do you do so in order to obtain information?**

(Percentage of those who mentioned that have consulted sociopolitical news presented by media from Moldova and media abroad, 724 respondents)



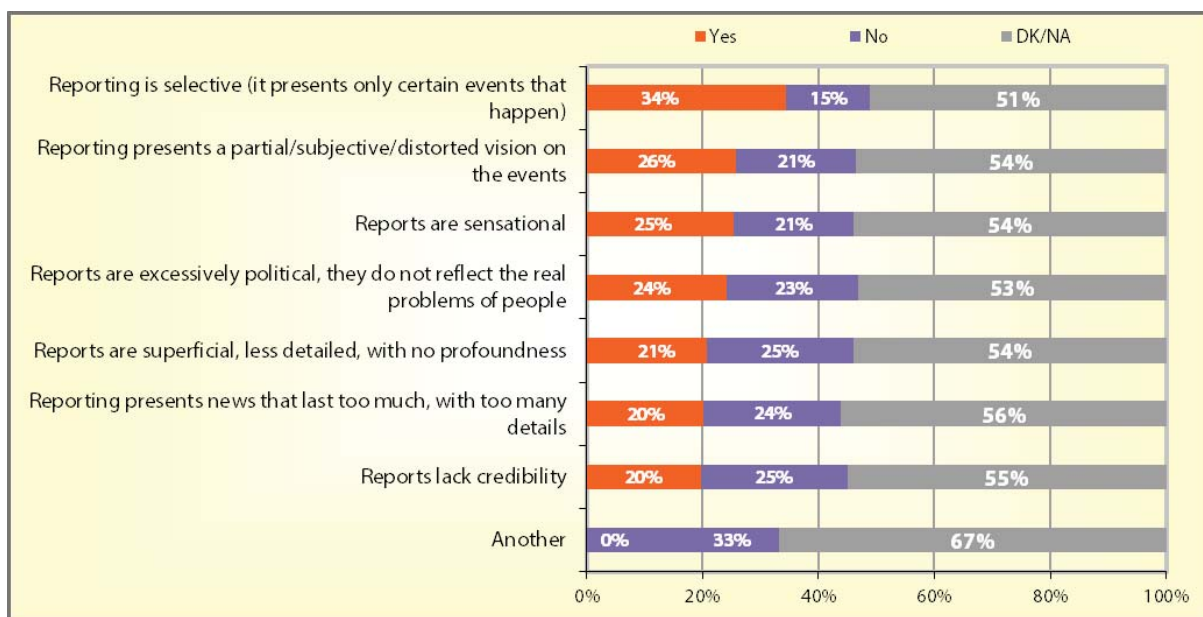
**Figure 23: Answers to question 25: On a scale of 1 to 4 with 1 very little/not at all and 4 very much, please evaluate how much you like the way US mass media present international sociopolitical information.**

(Percentage of those who mentioned that have consulted sociopolitical news presented by media from USA in the last 3 months, 198 respondents)



**Figure 24: Answers to question 26: What do you consider to be the biggest problems/difficulties for media outlets in the US when presenting international sociopolitical events?**

(Percentage of those who mentioned that have consulted sociopolitical news presented by media from USA in the last 3 months, 198 respondents)





## **Summary of answers to Figures 16 to 24 (questions 18 to 26)**

Comparing foreign media sources, it is obvious that Russian media are the second most important source for international sociopolitical information as 62.1% of respondents stated that they consulted Russian media either daily or at least once a week (35.6% on a daily basis) (Figure 19) while only 32.4% consulted sources from Romania either daily or at least once a week (14.2% on a daily basis) (Figure 16). Regarding Western media, in particular US sources, only 5.1% of respondents sought sociopolitical information either daily or weekly (1.9% on a daily basis) (Figure 22). Referring to the answers to question 27 (see the full report) on the frequency of seeking information from outside sources, just 19% of respondents did so at least once a week.

These figures also reflect respondents' satisfaction with the coverage of sociopolitical information. For Russian media, 60% claimed to be satisfied very much or a lot (Figure 20), 48% felt the same about Romanian media (Figure 17) while only 22.8% were satisfied with US media (Figure 23) which was also the source for which respondents expressed a higher level of discontent than satisfaction at nearly 29.8% (that figure was 35% for Russian and 37% for Romanian media).

When discussing specific problems, however, the results are somewhat paradoxical. According to the respondents, the media of all three countries have difficulties with coverage in the very same areas: a selective approach (presenting only some events) and a distorted, biased picture. In figures 18, 21 and 24, it appears that Russian media were seen as the most problematic as 51% and 45% respectively of respondents suggested that Russian media were selective and distorted reality whereas the same was true for 49% and 39% of respondents for Romanian media and 34% and 26% for US media. Regarding answers to question 28 (see the full report) about the biggest coverage problems of media in the EU, the list was topped by the same two problems: 31% complained of a selective approach and 27% cited distortions, approximately the same proportions for media from the US. The proportions for exactly the same type of coverage problems for Moldovan media was the highest at 71% and 67%, respectively (Figure 13).

***It is therefore relevant to suggest that when answering the question about satisfaction, respondents projected into their answers whether or not media reflected their own perceptions and understanding of the world and of international events rather than whether media followed professional criteria for covering such topics.***



**Figure 25: Answers to question 29: Which media outlets abroad do you trust the most when thinking about sociopolitical news?**

(Percentage of those who mentioned that have consulted sociopolitical news presented by media from Moldova and media abroad, 724 respondents)

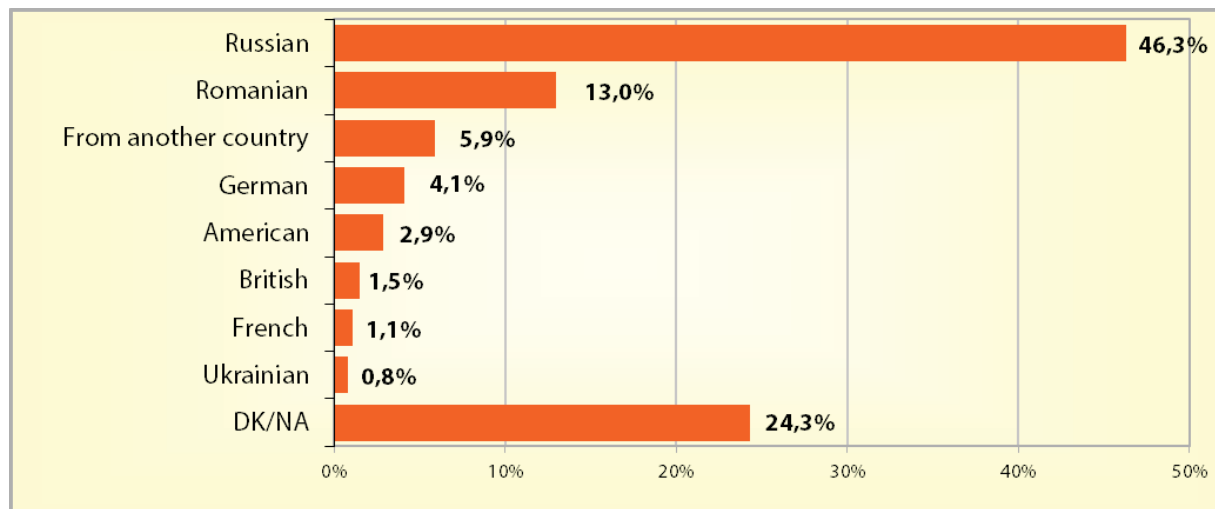


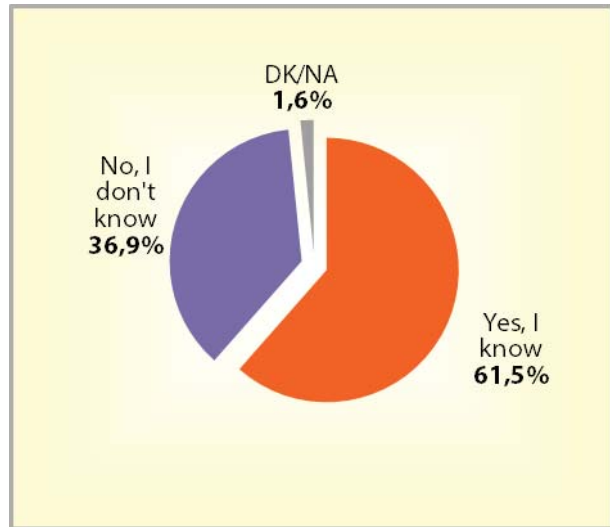
Figure 25 reflects the level of trust in foreign media coverage of sociopolitical information; the differences are the greatest all the survey data. The media in Russia enjoy 1.5 times the trust in media from all other countries combined. To a certain extent this matches the answers to question 22 (Figure 20) about satisfaction with the coverage of international sociopolitical information, yet the result is significantly more dominant considering the comparison with the media of other countries. One additional reason could be in the answers to question 30 (Figure 14) in which a convincing manner of presentation was the second most important individual preference for a certain media outlet as this is a well-known attribute of a number of Russian TV channels. On the other hand, the message is rather contradictory when compared with answers to question 23 (Figure 21) on the biggest problems in coverage as the Russian media were assessed as those with more severe levels of professional problems in comparison with all other foreign media. This contradiction becomes even more striking when manipulation in foreign media is assessed in question 41 (Figure 29).

Russian media are trusted primarily by ethnic minorities (83%), respondents with incomplete secondary education, those aged 45–59 and those living in a smaller towns.

## Manipulation

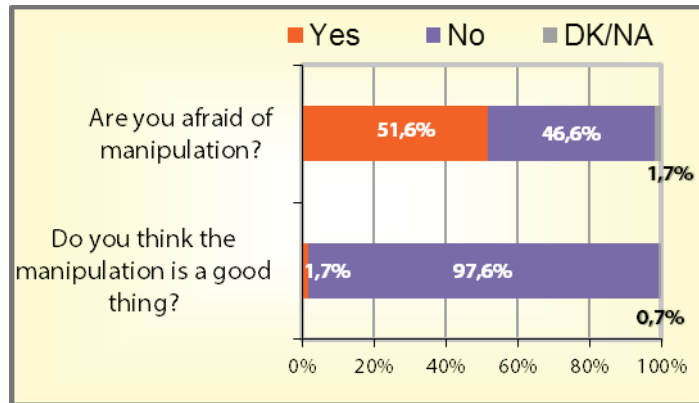
**Figure 26: Answers to question 32: Do you know what manipulation means?**

(Percentage of the total sample of 1137 respondents)



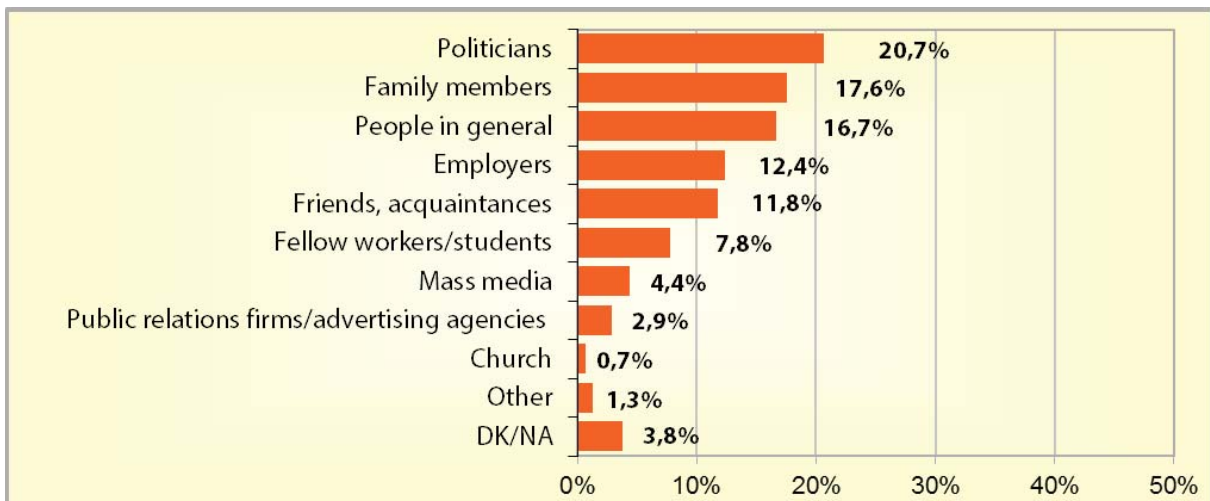
**Figure 27: Answers to question 33: Are you afraid of manipulation? Do you think it is a good thing?**

(Percentage of respondents that answered 'Yes, I know' at question 32 (Do you know what manipulation means?), 699 respondents)



**Figure 28: Answers to question 35: Who manipulates you most frequently?**

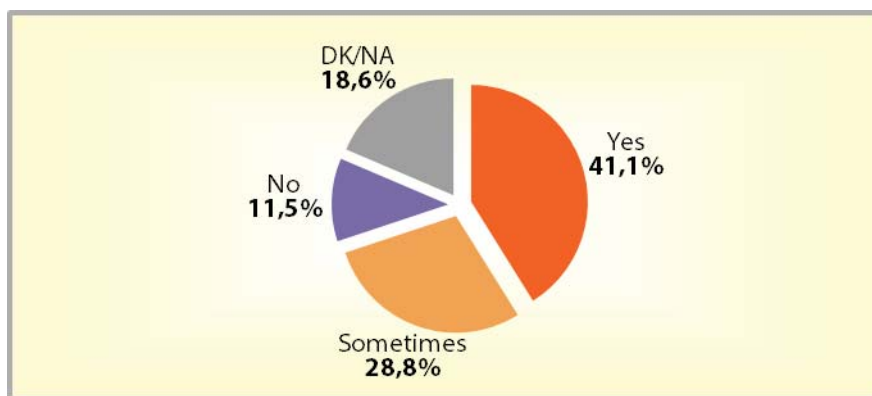
(Percentage of those that answered 'Yes, I know' at question 34 (Did you feel manipulated at least once?), 450 respondents)



While a relatively high portion of respondents declared they understood the term (Figure 26), some groups, in particular those with secondary or lower levels of education and to a lesser extent those living in rural areas and aged over 60, claimed scant knowledge of what manipulation means. Those are also the most vulnerable and likely to be manipulated groups. More than half the sample said they were afraid of manipulation, and 98% thought it was bad (Figure 27). Figure 28 shows that politicians were thought to be the biggest manipulators.

**Figure 29: Answers to question 40: Do you think media manipulate?**

(Percentage of the total sample of 1137 respondents)

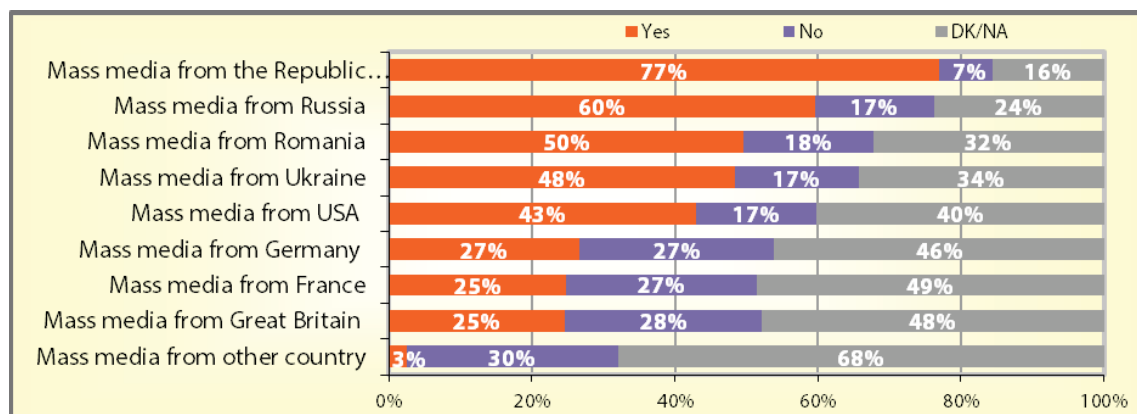


Some 70% of respondents think that media manipulate with quite a clear difference between an absolute yes (41.1%) and an unqualified no (11.5%) (Figure 29). On the other hand, only 4.4% of respondents in Figure 28 about who manipulates the most put the media in first place (it ranked 7<sup>th</sup> overall).

In the answers to both question 35 and question 40, similar groups did not think that media manipulate: those with lower levels of education (primarily those with incomplete secondary levels), the age groups over 60 and 18–29 and those living in rural areas.

**Figure 30: Answers to question 41: Media institutions from which countries do you consider manipulate (make use of propaganda) the most frequently?**

(Percentage of those that mentioned 'Yes' or 'Sometimes' at question 40 (How do you think, does media manipulate?), 740 respondents)



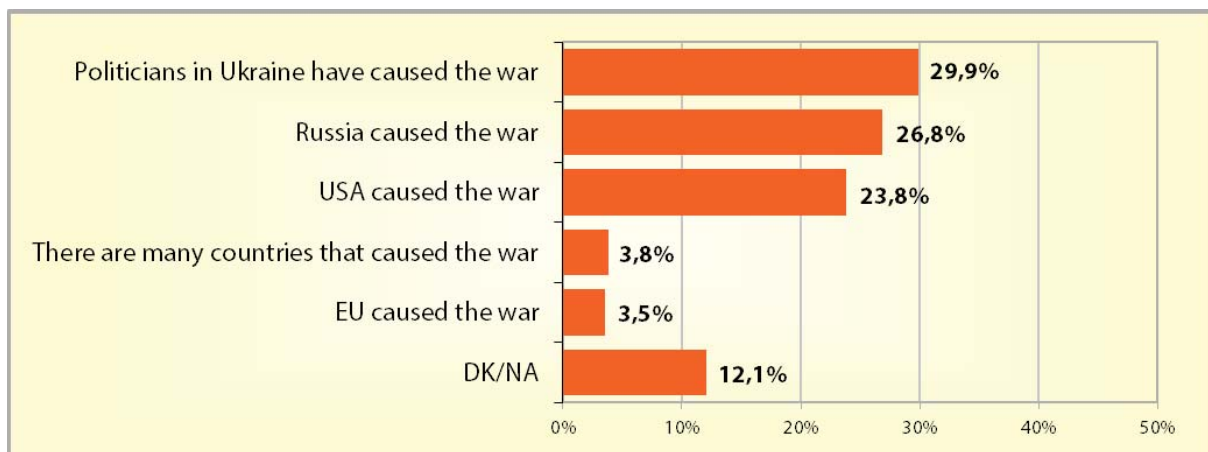
It is noteworthy that Moldovan media were assessed as the most manipulative (77%) thus confirming the findings in question 16 (Figure 13) about the biggest problems of Moldovan media. It appears that selective presentation among Moldovan media was the highest at 71% compared with 67% for foreign media. While that could to some extent be the result of a much more detailed knowledge of daily programming, it was mostly respondents with higher education and from municipalities who made that assessment.

As outlined in the commentary on question 29 (trust in foreign media), the answers to questions 23 (Figure 21), 29 (Figure 25) and 41 (Figure 30) reveal a relatively strong contradictory message: Russian media are by far the most trusted but at the same time have more severe professional problems in comparison with other foreign media and according to the answers to question 41 are also the second most manipulative.

Several questions were asked to assess the respondents' perception regarding the role of specific countries in maintaining world stability based on knowledge they had gathered through various means.

**Figure 31: Answers to question 42: Which of the following statements corresponds the most with your opinion about the war in Ukraine?**

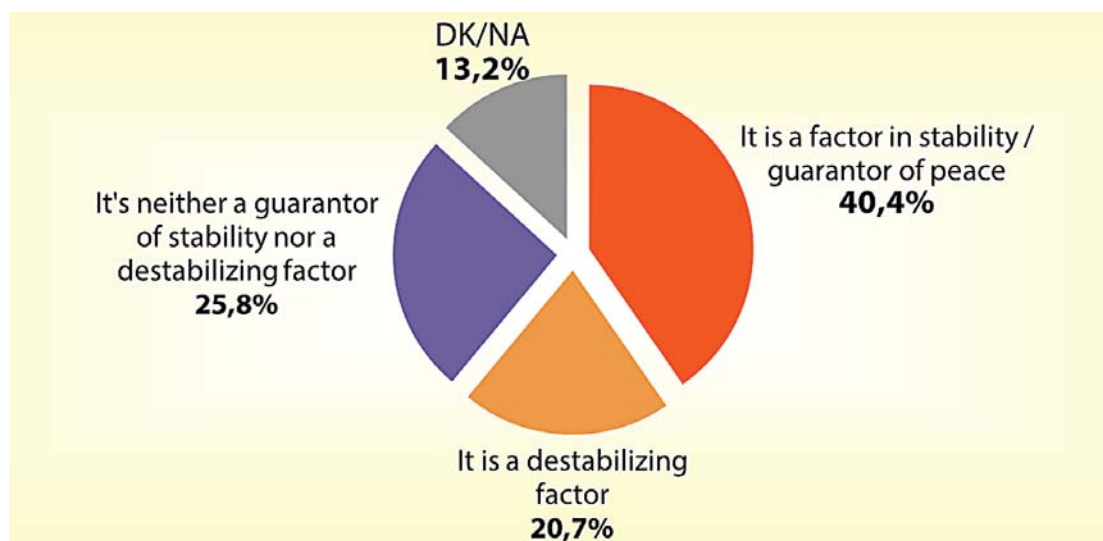
(Percentage of the total sample of 1137 respondents)



Approximately one-third (29.9%) of the respondents believed that the war in Ukraine was caused by Ukrainian politicians while 26.8% thought that Russia that caused it. The portion of people who believed that US was responsible for the war was slightly lower at 23.8%. It is worth mentioning that 30.4% and 28.8% of those who chose Russia and respectively Ukraine as the causes of the war were ethnic Moldovans compared to 48.4% of respondents from other ethnic groups who believed that the US was to blame for the war in Ukraine. The lower the level of education of respondents, the higher the percentage who believed the US caused the war (28% of respondents with secondary/incomplete education) and vice versa: The higher the level of education, the higher the percentage who believed that Russia caused the war (31.1% of people with higher education)

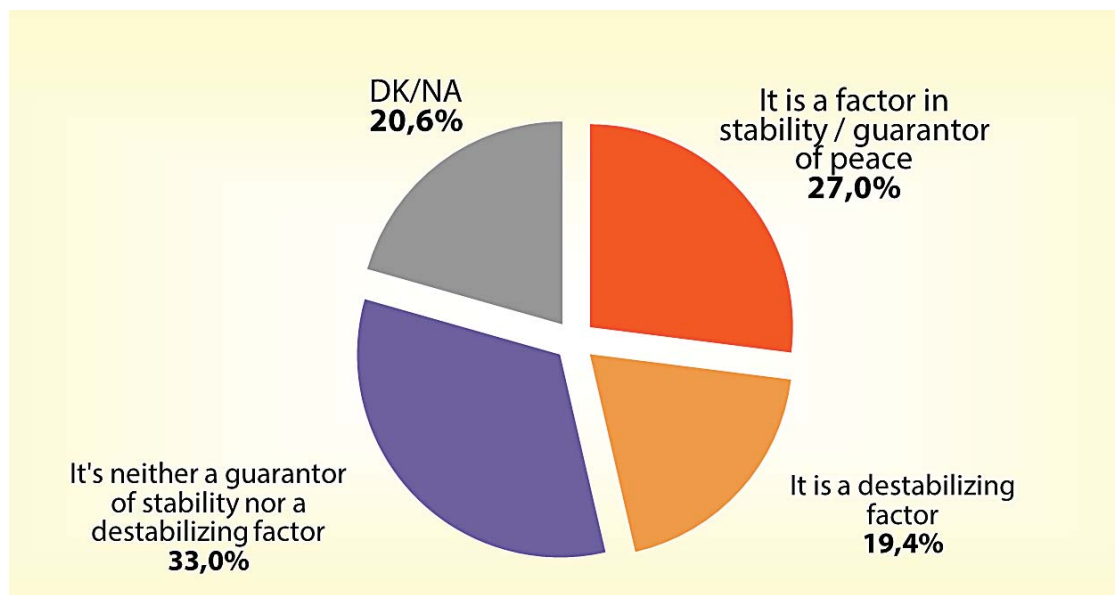
**Figure 32: Answers to question 45: In your opinion, what role does Russia play in maintaining global stability (world stability)?**

(Percentage of the total sample of 1137 respondents)



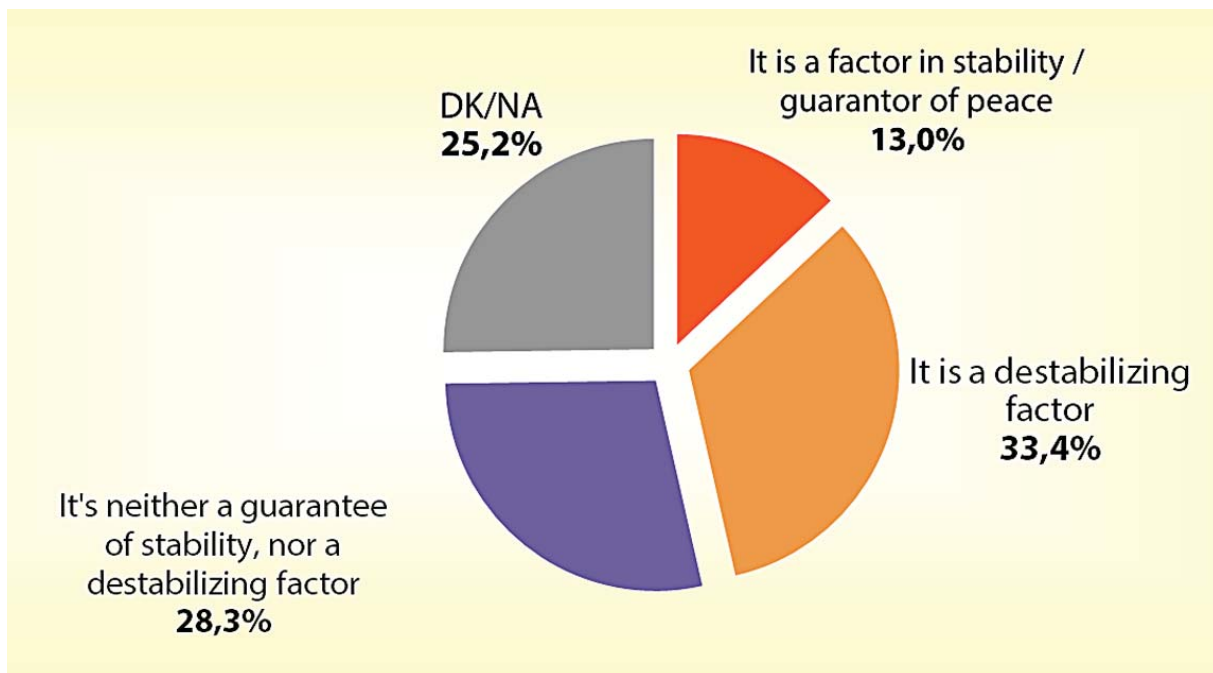
**Figure 33: Answers to question 46: In your opinion, what role does the EU play in maintaining global stability (world stability)?**

(Percentage of the total sample of 1137 respondents)



**Figure 34: Answers to question 47: In your opinion, what role does the US play in maintaining global stability (world stability)?**

(Percentage of the total sample of 1137 respondents)



Russia was seen by 40.4% of respondents as playing the role of guarantor of peace and a factor in stability compared to 20.7% who believed this country was a destabilizing factor (Figure 32). At the same time, the percentage of those who believed that EU and US were peacekeepers constituted 27% and 13% respectively (figures 33 and 34). The US was perceived to be the most destabilizing of the three by 33.4% of respondents compared with 19.4% for the EU and 20.7% for Russia. In all, 80% of those who believed that Russia is a peacekeeper and about 58% of those who believed that US was a destabilizing factor were from ethnic minorities. The percentage of ethnic Moldovans who believed that Russia is a guarantor of peace was about 34% while 29% believed the US was a destabilizing factor.

*It is therefore relevant to suggest that some respondents—in particular when answering questions assessing satisfaction and trust in general—projected in their answers whether or not media products (in particular Russian products) corresponded to their own perceptions and understanding of the world and of international events and to their own ideologies in general rather than whether media followed professional criteria for coverage. This is also somewhat apparent in the answers to questions 45–47 (figures 32–34) assessing the role of countries in global stability. When more specific questions were posed, more accurate assessments of media perception were obtained.*



## 4.2. FOCUS GROUPS

### *(Qualitative Analysis)*

#### *General Perception of Mass Media*

The first cluster of questions at the focus group sessions concerned the general perception of mass media and included three subtopics: (1) how participants orient themselves in the media landscape of the Republic of Moldova, (2) what media is foreign to them, and (3) what determines their choice for one form of media or another.

The participants in the focus groups maintained that they used various sources of information for current socio-political news: TV, online media, radio and newspapers. Most of the participants affirmed that they preferred to obtain their information from local/national media outlets and less from international ones. The national mass media most frequently mentioned in order of preference were channels Jurnal TV, Pro TV, Publika TV, Moldova 1, Canal 3, Prime, TV7 and БТБ (Bălți) followed by online sources [www.unimedia.md](http://www.unimedia.md), [www.jurnal.md](http://www.jurnal.md), [www.timpul.md](http://www.timpul.md), [www.privesc.eu](http://www.privesc.eu), [www.curaj.tv](http://www.curaj.tv), [www.point.md](http://www.point.md), [www.agora.md](http://www.agora.md), [www.realitatea.md](http://www.realitatea.md), [www.rise.md](http://www.rise.md) and [www.omega.md](http://www.omega.md), the local newspaper in Bălți (*CII/SP*) and Radio Orhei. Among international mass media organizations, participants mentioned the tv channels BBC, Euronews, Russia 1, Pervyi Kanal (OPT), HTB, PTP, PEH TB and the web platform [www.newsam.ru](http://www.newsam.ru).

The participants were invited to specify which mass media they considered to be “foreign media.” This question was included as part of the current debate within Moldovan civil society concerning the necessity to protect Moldova’s information space (see the introduction) and to more or less directly clarify if participants felt the need to have their information space protected from foreign influence.

The question generated a rather nuanced discussion by provoking other questions such as, “What do you mean by foreign?” and “In what sense foreign?” The answers varied highlighting different meanings of the word foreign. Foreign media were equally seen as:

- that of other states;
- that which reflects the politics and interest of other states;
- media from the US, Ukraine, Romania and Russia;
- media financed from abroad;
- media financed by local politicians and oligarchs;
- media that is politically controlled;
- media that reports on some subjects tendentiously;
- a branch of a foreign media outlet in Moldova;
- the interpretation of another country of events in Moldova.

Thus, the foreign element of mass media is not perceived in a strictly geographical sense. For some participants, foreign media can be very local, rooted in the local intricacies of politics and business.

***Mass media is foreign when it is controlled by someone, when it mirrors only the events desired by a group of persons or a single person who has his headquarters on Cantemir Avenue...***

[M4, 18 yrs, volunteer, Orhei, rural, RO]

However, for other participants, the geographical sense was still the primary one for foreign media.

***For me, the foreign press is directly the foreign press. What happens in our country, objective, non-objective is our characteristic for our country. We like it or not, it is not foreign. But if I watch a German TV channel, then it is clearly foreign media.***

[F5, 33 yrs, NGO coordinator, Orhei, rural, RO]

For some of the participants, mass media in the Russian language was foreign; this sense of foreign displays an ethnic point of view.

***All are foreign, except PRO TV and more recently Publika TV. In the rest, the news is for our Russians in Moldova.***

[F1, 53 yrs, teacher, Cahul, urban, RO]

For other participants, international media is clearly foreign.

***Euronews as an international media outlet is foreign for us.***

[M1, 31 yrs, engineer, Chisinau, urban, RO].

Some participants viewed the category of foreign media in the context of the origin of the content; from this point of view, only one TV channel qualified as non-foreign.

***Practically all of them are foreign, except Publika TV.***

[F4, 37 yrs, ONG member, Cahul urban, RO].

The particular feature of this TV channel is 24 hours of broadcasting exclusively local programs, mainly news and talk shows. This view is also close to the legal and administrative meaning of local or national media as defined by the current legislation and draft proposals for protecting national information space and for encouraging local media productions. However, Publika TV was viewed by some participants as foreign because the ownership of this channel is politically controlled.

A specific feature of mass media in the Republic of Moldova is the phenomenon of local branches of Romanian and Russian TV channels and newspapers. In the case of TV channels, local programs—mainly news programs and local talk shows produced by journalists from Moldova—are added to the broadcasts of the host channel, usually in the evening. Romanian and Russian newspapers that have branches in Moldova such as *Adevarul-Moldova* and *KP Moldova* contain a mixture of articles from the original newspaper and local pages with articles written by the Moldovan team of journalists. This phenomenon of local media “nested” within media from other countries shaped the way the foreign and non-foreign elements of the mass media are perceived. Thus, foreign and non-foreign dimensions are not seen as mutually exclusive spheres. “Our” and “foreign” in the Moldovan media are seen more as a continuum and a matter of degree. Thus, for some participants only mass media that is neither Romanian nor Russian

can be properly foreign. The reference to the foreign element of media was present in one way or another until the end of the focus group discussions; preliminary clarifications of foreignness became clearer for the participants themselves.

After their answers redefined the media landscape available to Moldovan citizens as sources of information, the participants were asked how they oriented themselves in this media landscape and what determined their preference for a source of information. When choosing sources for sociopolitical news, the participants mentioned the following criteria: language of the media; objectivity and impartiality in presenting information; tradition in the family; recommendations by friends; owners of the mass media outlets; topics presented and the professionalism of journalists.

The Russian speaking participants first took into account the language of media source unlike the Romanian speaking population for whom language was not a crucial criteria. They mentioned that it was difficult for them to understand Romanian even though they had learned it as there were words and expression they did not understand.

***There are lots of Romanian expressions I do not understand in the Moldovan media, so I miss the point. I know that it is very interesting how events are covered and approached in some programs and talk shows, but for me the language is not clear; this is why I have to read the news on the internet.***

*[M3, 49 yrs, company director, Chisinau, urban, RU]*

***The same can be said about me. Listening to information on Moldovan media, I do not understand some terms, and I do not get the point.***

*[F2, 43 yrs, manager, Chisinau, urban, RU]*

Along with language, tradition in the family was also a significant determining factor for choosing Russian language media, some of which is produced and (re)broadcast in/from Russia as a legacy of Soviet times.

***My mother watches Prime/Pervii Kanal because older persons are more conservative, so I watch news on Prime as well.***

*[F4, 43 ANI, social assistant, Singerei, rural, RO]*

Family tradition as a rule determined the options of older generations while the younger participants took into account recommendations from friends, especially for online media.

***I choose according to the number of likes. For example, if 20 of my 200 friends on Facebook like, read and share a link/a news item, then I will read/watch it as well because this sounds to me like a recommendation.***

*[M2, 25 yrs, unemployed, Balti, urban, RU]*

Tradition and the number of likes/shares could be considered subjective factors in choosing one media source over another. The professionalism of journalists and their promptness, objectivity and impartiality in presenting information are more objective criteria for choosing a source.

***It is very important, as my colleague said, to see how that event is presented. Often I choose a program because of one journalist or another.***

*[F2, 41 yrs, teacher, Singerei, rural, RO]*

***I like live reporting on an event as it happens, for example, from the main square in Chisinau.***

*[M3, 36 yrs, jurist, Cahul, urban, RO]*

The participants attributed the following positive features to the media that they prefer: objectivity of information; clear and succinct content; presentation of several points of view; diversity of information; promptness in presenting news; chronological presentation of news; use of video and other materials and accessible language. The participants were less satisfied with a lack of professionalism among journalists; the tendentious presentation of topics/subjects/events; information taken from other sources; a focus on sensational news; the selective presentation of events; the use of manipulation; neglecting the view of ordinary citizens; a focus on negative news and repeating the news incessantly.

## *Perception of the News*

The starting point for discussing the perception of the news was the question, “How often do you discuss the socio-political news from Moldova and from the world as a whole with your friends and colleagues?” followed by “Has it ever happened that there has been different information reported about the same topic/event? If so, how can you explain this situation?”

Most of the participants affirmed that they discuss the socio-political news with friends and colleagues, some of them even daily. Women were more reserved in discussing these topics because usually the discussions end up in polemics which, according to them, are rather difficult to manage.

***I always try to get information in the evening so as to be able to discuss it the next day with other people.***

*[M1, 55 yrs, teacher, Cahul, urban, RO]*

***I would prefer more pleasant discussions, but we cannot escape political discussions given the hard political times we are living through.***

*[M3, 49 yrs, company director, Chisinau, urban, RU]*

***I try in general not to discuss political news, but I am influenced by all the people discussing it around me, so I end up talking about politics.***

*[F3, 21 yrs, student, Balti, urban, RU]*

The socio-political news from other countries is discussed as well but less frequently. Some participants informed themselves about socio-political news from other countries because they have relatives in those there

or because international/global news concerns everyone. Participants mentioned the refugee crisis, wars and terrorist attacks among news items; however, for most of them the local news and local politics took priority.

***Yes, we discuss the foreign news especially from Ukraine or Romania but from other countries as well. We all have some relatives—a brother, a sister—in another country.***

[F3, 41 yrs, civil servant, Cahul, urban, RO]

***Not so frequently as the local news but quite often because now everything is boiling around; only the lazy do not discuss it.***

[F4, 23 yrs, teacher, Balti, urban, RU]

***We discuss mainly news about Ukraine and Russia because it is significant for us, but nevertheless your shirt is close to your body, so we discuss mainly local news which determines our daily life.***

[M3, 49 yrs, company director, Chisinau, urban, RU]

When discussing socio-political news with other people, all the participants had experienced situations in which they discovered that they had different information about the same topic/event; this usually led to polemics.

***Everywhere I go people discuss politics and every time it ends with an argument. The people are very divided on political issues; it is impossible to discuss them.*** [F1, 53 yrs, teacher, Cahul, urban RO]

The situation was explained by participants in similar terms as the failure of mass media to mirror reality in an objective and correct way. Thus, focus group participants considered that mass media is politically controlled; each media has its own interest; mass media wants to influence the public/audience; mass media manipulates; journalists use subjective approaches; one source dismantles and rejects the information presented by another source and the information is presented just to attract an audience.

***Each media outlet approaches the topic from the perspective that is more convenient for them.***

[F4, 18 yrs, high school, Orhei, rural, RO]

***If there is a different political interest, then different political ideas will be disseminated. The media will try to camouflage and reduce everything to a certain idea.***

[F2, 18 yrs unemployed, Balti, urban, RU]

These explanations assume implicitly that facts exist independently of and prior to opinions, and mass media outlets have to mirror the facts objectively. Consequently, all of them have to present the same correct data and information about events. Because of their different political interests, however, media outlets fail to present the correct facts and therefore the truth itself. A considerable number of participants still hoped that truth could nevertheless be retrieved and reconstructed like a puzzle from the bits of truth delivered in various mass media products.

All participants affirmed that they consulted more or less frequently (although some of them only in the case of “extreme news”) several mass me-



dia outlets to see and compare how they reported the same topic/event. The participants affirmed that they always felt the need to compare information from different sources because media subjectively reports on socio-political topics. Most participants mentioned that they often consulted 2 or 3 sources daily.

***To have a correct opinion you have to check at least three sources. If you watch only one channel you are misled.***

[F5, 37 yrs, doctor, Singerei, rural, RO]

***Each TV channel—being under a certain influence—presents each event differently. Thus, it is impossible to make a conclusion if you do not watch everything.***

[F4, 23 yrs, teacher, Balti, URBAN, RU]

***My impression is that there is no independent mass media in reporting political news; this is why one has to look for several sources.***

[M2, 25yrs, unemployed, Balti, urban, RU]

***Sometimes I even read the media presenting contradictory points of view. For example, Jurnal TV says there were 60,000 protesters while Publika TV said there were only 3,000. I can judge who is closer to truth because I was among the protesters.***

[M1, 31 yrs, engineer, Chisinau, urban RO]

The media that participants at the focus group consulted alternatively for obtaining a more “correct opinion” on socio-political topics were channels Jurnal TV, Pro TV, Publika TV, Prime, Moldova 1, Canal 3, TV7, BBC, Euronews, PTP, Pervii Kanal (OPT) and online media [www.agora.md](http://www.agora.md), [www.unimedia.md](http://www.unimedia.md), [www.privesc.eu](http://www.privesc.eu), [www.curaj.tv](http://www.curaj.tv), [www.point.md](http://www.point.md) and [www.realitate.md](http://www.realitate.md).

Most of the participants mentioned that they used online sources as alternatives to traditional ones—mainly television—specifying that on the Internet they can find investigative pieces and objective analyses that cannot be found on TV. In contrast, the younger participants used the Internet and social media not as alternatives to more traditional media but as their basic sources of information.

***On the Internet you can find everything. Online media is more active and topical than TV. They post the news immediately without having time to embellish it. It is easier to inform yourself on the Internet because not all analysts and experts are paid/biased.***

[M3, 36 yrs, jurist, Cahul, urban, RO]

For others, the Internet is not appreciated for its brevity and promptness but instead for the in-depth approaches and details that they can find online.

***On TV the news items are short, but on the Internet you can find more details. Often I read Ziarul de Garda and Jurnal TV which have more details and investigative articles.***

[M4, 55 yrs, mayor, Singerei, rural, RO]



Some participants read even the comments in the footnotes of a news item on an Internet webpage where they state they can find more trustworthy information.

***When Filat was arrested there was only talking on TV, but on the Internet I found the denunciation written by Ilan Shor—each page signed—so I had the possibility to read it all.***

[F2, 41 yrs, teacher, Singerei, rural, RO]

The old “argument of authority” finds its way on to the Internet as well.

***To inform myself, I often read the blog of an important person.***

[M1, 28yrs, teacher, Orhei, rural, RO]

The Internet is seen by most of the participants mainly as an empowering tool. Thus, they claimed that they not only informed themselves with all varieties of traditional media but also on the Internet to achieve a clear view of what “really happens.” Although it can be untamed, confusing and overwhelming, the Internet is nevertheless a place to look for genuine news.

Watching several TV channels and then scrutinizing the Internet for more in-depth information is a rather demanding exercise for some participants, so a few of them admitted that usually they get socio-political news from a single source they trust.

***If I have a credible source, I consult mainly that source, but if there is extreme news, then I consult other sources as well. Usually, people watch or read the source they trust.***

[M1, 31 yrs, engineer-manager, Chisinau, urban, RO]

A few other participants maintained that there are fewer and fewer credible sources of information and that they are more misinformed than informed. TV stations plus Internet sites create a plurality of points of view which for some consumers only intensifies disinformation. For them, media space appears confusing and too diverse; they confessed they are unable to create an intelligible, complete picture of Moldovan mass media.

***Now there are so many manipulative sources, and you do not even have anything to compare them with. Before I used to compare Unimedia and Journal TV. Now Unimedia has another political view so it is not interesting; I do not have anything to compare.***

[M3, 22 yrs, call centre operator, Chisinau, urban, RO]

***I am so disappointed because of all these lies that I do not want to watch TV anymore.***

[F3, 41 yrs, civil servant Cahul, urban, RO]

Participants were asked how often they consulted foreign mass media to compare how they reported the same topic/event and what foreign media—Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian, EU-based, US— they consulted for this purpose. The number consulting foreign media was smaller than the number consulting alternative local sources. Romanian speaking participants consulted Romanian, EU and US media because they are more credible sources. Russian speaking participants preferred Russian and Ukrainian media because of language accessibility. Some of the Russian speaking participants consulted the Romanian, EU and US media as well to verify the credibility of information from Russian media.

***If I want mainstream news, I find it on Euronews.***

*[M3, 23 yrs, student, Orhei, rural, RO]*

***For example, the negotiations with the IMF were presented in the Moldovan media as advancing, but when I looked through the international sites I saw that the IMF does not intend to give us the loan and that financial assistance for Moldova has ceased.***

*[M3, 36 yrs, jurist Cahul, urban, RO]*

The participants were asked how in their view a trustworthy news item should look. In the current media landscape, it is debatable whether an allegedly “ideal” news article will eliminate any curiosity to see what alternative sources say about an event or that “ideal” news is a necessary concept that offers a standard for evaluating how the news should be reported. Nevertheless, in discussing what a story/report on a socio-political topic should include, the participants came up with several criteria for a trustworthy report.

***Impartial and more documentation.***

*[M3, 36 yrs jurist, urban, RO]*

***Everything has to be supported with proof.***

*[F3, 20 yrs student, Orhei, rural, RO]*

In addition, a trustworthy news item has to present at least two points of view: one pro and another against. For others, three points of view are necessary: one pro, one against and a neutral one from an external source.

***Russian TV channels have to present at least two points of view—the government’s and the opposition’s— to let the audience form its own opinion, but they present only one and that’s all.***

*[M3, 49 yrs, company director, Chisinau, urban, RU]*

In the eyes of participants, an ideal news item has to have the following characteristics: objectivity, neutrality, correctness, video and photo material, proof, a relevant and adequate title, documentation based on several sources, details, several points of view and respect for the professional ethics of journalism. According to the participants, Euronews, [www.point.md](http://www.point.md), [www.agora.md](http://www.agora.md), *SP* (Bălți), Jurnal TV, Pro TV and TV7 respect to some extent these criteria for credible socio-political news.

***The most independent newspaper is the local SP. It tries to offer different points of view, and if there is a point of view of a political party, they present it as a commercial. The articles on socio-political issues are as close to media independence as possible.***

*[F4, 23 yrs, educator, Balti, urban, RU]*

***Point.md is a more objective site, and it offers proof unlike the media that are biased and present information without facts or proof.***

*[M3, 49 yrs, company director, Chisinau, urban, RU]*

[The participants seemed unaware that unlike the other media listed, [www.point.md](http://www.point.md) does not offer original news. It posts among other things condensed news items in the Russian language taken from local, Russian

and international media. Furthermore, international news is not posted directly from the original media site but is translated by Russian websites].

Establishing the criteria for credible and professional news served as a starting point for the next topic of discussion: manipulation and propaganda. Although the questions concerning manipulation and propaganda were formulated only in the third part of the focus group discussions, the reference of the participants to manipulation and propaganda appeared earlier in the discussion. This shows that there is an awareness of manipulation and propaganda among media consumers and that manipulation and propaganda are not obsolete relics of the Cold War but are instead the current realities of mass media.

## *Perception of Manipulation and Propaganda in Mass Media*

As specified in the introduction to this study, the context for addressing manipulation and propaganda is the current debate in Moldovan civil society about the necessity to protect our information space under conditions of increased Russian propaganda. According to observers, following the dramatic developments of 2014—the political crisis in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, the Western sanctions imposed on Russia and the armed conflict in Ukraine’s east—Russian television started to make considerable use of propaganda.<sup>8</sup> Given the fact that an increased number of Russian stations are broadcasting in Moldova, the aim of this part of the discussions was to see if the audience was able to understand what the phenomena of media manipulation and propaganda mean and if they had the critical means to resist them.

Clarifying the role of mass media and how currently existing outlets perform this role was considered a plausible way of starting a discussion about manipulation and propaganda in mass media. According to the participants, the role of mass media is (1) to inform, (2) to educate, (3) to form opinions and (4) to maintain balance in society. The participants juxtaposed the ideal role of media and the role played by the existing media and mapped the difference.

***Mass media must be the fourth power in the state. It has the role to educate, to inform, to present the real situation in our country and in the world, but our mass media has the role to brainwash, to mislead, to lie.***

*[M3, 36 yrs jurist, Cahul, urban, RO]*

***Today the role of mass media is to defend those in power... Now we see that when Filat was the Prime Minister he committed many illegal acts but mass media reported only on his meetings with European leaders.***

*[M3, 49 yrs company director, Chisinau, urban, RU]*

<sup>8</sup> Maria Lipman, *How Russia has come to loathe the West*, 13 March, 2015, available at [http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_how\\_russia\\_has\\_come\\_to\\_loathe\\_the\\_west311346](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_how_russia_has_come_to_loathe_the_west311346)

Most participants considered that the mass media does not perform its role adequately because it is not financially independent and thus has to favor political interests. The media is constrained to reflect the positions and interests of the owners and thus to manipulate.

***Media institutions do not have the possibility to be independent. When an independent media institution appears, it is a minority among the politically controlled media, and it cannot compete with the others.***

*[F4, 18 yrs, high schools, Orhei, rural, RO]*

Manipulation was defined by the focus group participants as an instrument by which certain ideas are presented to the audience/public while propaganda was defined as more sustained manipulation with the purpose to influence the public and to shape preferences. Some of the participants considered that manipulation and propaganda go hand in hand having the same purpose: to impose an idea. Nevertheless, some participants considered that manipulation is more dangerous than propaganda because you are not able to detect it while propaganda is more direct and can be more easily detected.

***Manipulation is more dangerous; it does not allow you to realize that you are being manipulated.***

*[M2, 29 yrs teacher, Orhei, rural, RO]*

***Manipulation is a psychological change, but propaganda is a direct, brutal change telling an untruth that you can see with your own eyes.***

*[M3, 22 yrs, call center operator, Chisinau, urban, RO]*

***Propaganda aims to develop an idea and to present it to others. If you are told repeatedly that the milk is black, black, black, you will say at some point that milk is black.***

*[F3, 37 yrs, adjunct-director gymnasium, Singerei, rural, RO]*

Summarizing, the participants defined manipulation as disinformation, hiding the truth, influence at a subconscious level, a personal interest in the information, presenting only a single point of view and appealing to emotions. Propaganda, on the other hand, had the following features: political advertising, giving weight to an event, imposing the interests and ideas of someone, determining people to act in a certain way and disseminating an idea intensely.

The participants plausibly defined propaganda as information that is not impartial and that is used primarily to influence an audience and further an agenda often by presenting facts selectively to encourage a particular synthesis or by using loaded messages to produce an emotional rather than a rational response to the information presented. In addition, they had the ability to detect propaganda mentioning manipulative and propaganda techniques such as showing only one side of the story, selective use of data and facts, biased experts and the highlighting of events by journalists among others.

***You can see often on TV, especially on Publika TV, when the moderator tries to lead the discussion in the direction he wants, that he does do look for the truth,... he shapes it according to what he wants to hear.***

*[M3, 36yrs, jurist, Cahul, urban, RO]*

***There have to be just facts and that's all. If you see emphasis on an event then it is clear that they intend to influence you, to involve the emotional reactions of those who read or watch.***

*[F4, 23 yrs, educator, Balti, urban, RU]*

Some participants see propaganda in diversity and media pluralism. This can be seen as an extreme consequence of suspecting propaganda everywhere, but it is also a plausible observation of the fact that political and financial groups try concomitantly to monopolize mass media and to create an illusion of pluralism.

***There is a plurality of media channels, and they speak differently. Each tries to impose its point of view, and if this happens, it means that they are trying to manipulate.***

*[M1, 38 yrs, unemployed, Chisinau, urban, RU]*

***When people understood that media can influence the masses, they started to use it as an instrument. Whoever had the resources established different media outlets with different titles, used for the same purpose.***

*[M3, 24 yrs, programmer, Balti, urban, RU]*

All the participants agreed that mass media in Moldova use manipulation and propaganda. Most of the participants from both urban and rural areas and both young and older considered that there were times when they had been manipulated by mass media.

***I consider that I voted in the elections because I was manipulated by mass media. I did not consider that it was my duty to vote, but because the media presented a candidate and the future in that way, I voted for him.***

*[F3, 21 yrs, student, Balti, urban, RU]*

Those participants who claimed that they did not feel they had been manipulated by Moldovan media were a minority; they trusted nothing in the media and were able to detect instantly when media tried to manipulate them.

Concerning foreign media, opinions were divided. Most participants considered that Russian media manipulated more than US, EU and Romania media; nevertheless, some participants considered that US media used both manipulation and propaganda although not as aggressively as Russian media. For them, powerful states that have geopolitical interests are better trained in using manipulation and propaganda.

***States that are able to control half of the globe like the US use propaganda at the psychological level. They have experts working on this. They even make an art of manipulating people. In Russia, from a psychological art propaganda became a psychological weapon.***

*[M3, 22 yrs, call centre operator, Chisinau, urban, RO]*



***In our country, Russian media is more known, but in the US propaganda is used very frequently as in Russia.***

*[M3, 23 yrs, student, Orhei, rural, RO]*

***US media is like our media and like Russian media. They defend their own country and the interests of their country. All the news they have from Iran and Syria are all the same. Nobody will say that those from Iran or Syria are right because they do not want to put their own government on its knees.***

*[M4, 55 yrs, mayor, Singerei, rural, RO]*

Most of the participants mentioned that they felt manipulated more often by Russian media mainly on topics related to foreign politics.

***During the first stage of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Russian media was saying that Ukrainians kill, they are fascists, and you were watching and saying how can Ukrainians behave like that? After that you meet people from Ukraine, talk to them, you see that they are normal people. Listening to Russian media, you want to kill the Ukrainians, then you discover that the situation was vastly different from that presented.***

*[F3, 21 yrs, student, Balti, urban, RU]*

Some participants affirmed that they very rarely watched/read the US media and did not have too many occasions to notice if US media manipulates or not compared with Russian media which they access more frequently. Nevertheless, their rare contact with US media did not stop them from assuming that US media is more advanced in using propaganda and that the US uses it in a subtle way.

***US media manipulate as well, but we do not feel this because they manipulate through means and actions that we do not see and do not feel. Russian media is at lower level; for them manipulation is simple like giving a toy to a child. These economic sanctions on fruits, wine, etc. demonstrate that they do not understand that they make the population worse off and angry. They do not know more advanced techniques of manipulation.***

*[F3, 41 yrs, civil servant, Cahul, urban, RO]*

When mass media and manipulation/propaganda were depicted by participants as going hand in hand or as twin sisters not only in Moldovan media but also in Russian, US and international media, the participants were asked why and how they still trusted mass media and particularly which socio-political news in foreign media was still trustworthy. The answers varied. An apparently neutral position expressed by several persons was that they trusted the media that confirmed their own positions and views: "If the media outlet publishes news that confirms my point of view, then I will trust it [M4, 27 yrs, teacher-coordinator, urban, RU]. This sounds like a neutral and impartial approach; however, this position generates a question that is a variation of the chicken and egg dilemma: which came first, my point of view or that of the mass media that shaped it? In addition, instead of looking for a trustworthy fact or approach, this way of trusting media can reinforce a certain ideological position.



Some participants stated that they consult several foreign/international media outlets, an exercise similar to the scrutinizing the local/Moldovan mass media when looking for bits of truth to reconstruct a “true picture” of reality.

***One has to look from three perspectives. You look at CNN which says this and that, then you look at Russian TV and then at Euronews which is more neutral and impartial.***

*[M1, 31 yrs, engineer, Chisinau, RO]*

Some express their trust in the European media they access.

***In European media, for example on Euronews, I have never seen embellishing in terms of emotions, but in Russian media you can see all elements of manipulation.***

*[F4, 23 yrs, educator, Balti, urban, RU]*

Some other participants trust US media because it defends the interests of the EU and Ukraine. Although, the US and Russia are seen as being in geopolitical competition, there is a significant difference: While the US defends the interests of other countries, Russia defends only her own interests. This is why US mass media is more neutral and objective.

***My opinion about US media is that they are doing something—they support the EU—but Russia does not do anything; they are isolating themselves, doing only bad things for everyone. They are not able to find a common language even with Belarus.***

*[M4, 55 yrs, carpenter, Cahul, urban, RO]*

For some of the participants, the news from Russian media presents exclusively the point of view of the Russian government and manipulates.

***Look how Putin is praised in the Russian media. This is manipulation. He is everything, the salvation of Russia...***

*[M4, 55 yrs, carpenter, Cahul, urban, RO]*

***Zero trust in Russia media. We have relatives who live and work in Russia, and they tell us that their reality is different. There is no talk about the inflation of the ruble but only about Syria and Ukraine on all channels.***

*[M3, 36 yrs, jurist, Cahul, urban, RO]*

Nevertheless, some of the Russian speaking participants affirmed that they trusted Russian media to the degree that it confirmed the beliefs and opinions they already had on the event reported. In addition, participants mainly from rural areas in the age category 36–55 trusted the Russian media because of the professionalism of Russian journalists: “I like the professionalism of journalists from Russia” [F1, 41 yrs, gymnasium director, Singerei, rural, RO]. These persons expressed their need to have journalists more involved in inculcating some positive values in society, and they considered that Russian journalists excelled in this.

***I watch the Russian program Pusti Govoreat rather regularly. Russians have so many authentic programs created by themselves that we do not have. Our media does not create anything specific. Something was***

***copied from Romania, something from Russia, but there is nothing specifically local except discussions/talks and all kinds of meetings. I like Malakhov's sign-off on each program (Malakhov is the TV host of the program Pusti Govoreat): 'Take care and love each other.'***

*[F1, 41 yrs, director gymnasium, Singerei, rural, RO]*

The preference for this specific program (and for several others similar to it) is not a preference for a news program but for an infotainment-style talk show<sup>9</sup> that invites guests to come before a studio audience to address personal issues—crime, drug abuse, suicide, prostitution, infidelity—and other social issues but not political issues, all within the parameters of press freedom established by the official TV channel Pervii Kanal.<sup>10</sup> In addition, according to an analysis of Russian media, this show is an adaptation of several shows on US television.<sup>11</sup> The trust that this type of journalism generates in the Moldovan audience might have an influence on the perception of Russian mass media in general as teaching values and thus as more trustworthy without seeing that this professionalism is confined to the view of media freedom as established by the Russian official/state media.

## *Punishment for Manipulation and Propaganda*

The participants at the focus groups were asked if they thought mass media outlets should be punished for manipulating information, what circumstances should decide/apply punishment and what kind of punishment would be appropriate. Without exception, younger and older participants both rural and urban considered that media should be punished for publishing propaganda. The authorities that can decide what this punishment should be were the Audio-visual Coordinating Council, a journalists' union, an international independent commission, the judicial system and the Prosecutor's office. The forms of punishments mentioned included withdrawing the license of the media institution, fines, a ban on broadcasting for 3 years, a ban on broadcasting socio-political news, community service and verifying the news before publishing/broadcasting it.

***Withdraw the license so that they will not be able to broadcast.***

*[M4, 55 yrs, mayor, Singerei, rural, RO]*

***Shut down the TV channel as NIT was. An economic agent that does not offer qualitative services is left without a license; the same has to happen with media companies. The other mass media outlets will understand that they cannot manipulate.***

*[M3, 36 yrs, jurist, Cahul, urban, RO]*

<sup>9</sup> Available at <http://pust-govorjat.ru/>

<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of the show see Hutchings, Stephen and Rulyova, Natalia, *Television and Culture in Putin's Russia: Remote Control*, London & New York: Routledge. 2009, Chapter 4, pp. 89–114.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

While there was unanimity that media institutions have to be punished for manipulation and propaganda, the respondents were more indulgent with journalists. They did not blame them. On the contrary, journalists were justified as dependent on editorial politics and on financial constraints.

***The principal problem is the fact that a journalist is an employee, he has a salary, but if the salary depends on the political color of someone, then it is normal for him to work as he is told... Journalists are salaried employees, and if they have an order, they have to execute it, the alternative is to refuse and to leave the country.***

*[F3, 41 yrs, civil servant, Cahul, urban, RO]*

A journalist is not seen as a kind of hero with more responsibilities than any other category of employee but rather as an obedient, ordinary employee who needs a salary. Nevertheless, he is described as consciously accepting the manipulative nature of his job.

***Each media outlet approaches the topic from the perspective that is more convenient for them; the journalist needs a salary, so he has to do his job like all other employees.***

*[F4, 18 yrs, high school, Orhei, rural, RO]*

This indulgence is in accord with the lack of an enforceable code of ethics for journalists' professional conduct not only in Moldova but in other countries as well. Unlike a surgeon who messes up an operation and can lose his license or a lawyer who lies and can be jailed for contempt of court, a journalist does not have to surrender his press card for faulty reporting.

In conclusion, the participants considered that there is systemic bias in mass media displaying unanimously, but unintentionally, the kind of propaganda model of media first presented by Herman and Chomsky.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the participants were able to a certain extent to detect elements of propaganda and manipulation. The question of how this critical mind set is compatible with some rather unconditional preferences for one mass media outlet or another is explored and clarified in the conclusion of this study.

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<sup>12</sup> The propaganda model is a theory advanced by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky which argues systemic biases in the mass media and seeks to explain them in terms of structural economic causes. First presented in their 1988 book *Manufacturing Consent: the Political Economy of the Mass Media* (Pantheon Books), the propaganda model views the private media as businesses selling a product—readers and audiences (rather than news)—to other businesses (advertisers) and relying primarily on government and corporate information and propaganda. The theory postulates five general classes of “filters” that determine the type of news that is presented in news media: ownership of the medium, the medium’s funding, sourcing of the news, flak, and anti-communist ideology. The first three (ownership, funding, and sourcing) are generally regarded by the authors as being the most important. Although the model was based mainly on the characterization of United States media, Chomsky and Herman believe the theory is equally applicable to any country that shares the basic economic structure and organizing principles the model postulates as the cause of media bias.

## *Comparison of the US News and the Russian News*

The last part of the discussions consisted in watching, commenting on and analyzing news broadcasts by US and Russian TV channels on the same international topic which was making the headlines in the days when the focus groups were held: the entry of Russia into the war in Syria. The items were selected by the Center for Independent Journalism, IMAS, and the experts involved in the project. The US channel was CNN – <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/07/middleeast/russia-syria-isis/index.html> and the Russian channel was Pervii Kanal - <http://www.1tv.ru/news/polit/293681>

The first item watched was the CNN news. After watching the report, the most frequent reactions of the focus group participants were the following.

- Russia kills innocent people.
- The report presents the American view of the situation.
- Turkey has its own interest in this war.
- The information on refugees is credible.
- The reporting is done in the evening, everything is dark and sombre.
- You do not know whom to trust.
- The video images are not from the place of events.
- There is little proof.
- The reporting is accusatory.
- The reporter's emotions are visible.
- This was manipulation.

A further discussion of the news item made the differing points of views more clear. Some participants considered that the information presented was true and reflected reality while others considered that there was not enough proof in the CNN report and that the way of presenting the information was not credible.

***The news presented two points of view: Russians and the others. The position of the Turkish prime minister was also presented.***

*[M4, 55 yrs, mayor, Singerei, rural, RO]*

***I trust Americans because in spite of some details, they are better than we are in protecting human rights or freedom of press. I do not trust 100 percent this news item; nevertheless, it is more credible for me than our information, even Russian information.***

*[M3, 49 yrs, company director, Chisinau, urban, RU]*

***Russia says it bombs only armed people; the US says that Russia bombs innocent people; it is hard to tell where the truth is because we are not there.***

*[F4, 23 yrs, teacher, Balti, urban, RU]*

***The news is presented in such a way as to make Russia responsible for the events in Syria. And the refugees from Syria invade Europe, so the EU has a reason to be against Russia. This is how manipulation looks. There is everywhere the interest of the big powers, the US, the EU, Russia, and everything is reduced to this.***

*[F3, 41 yrs, civil servant, Cahul, urban, RO]*

Most of the participants had things they liked such as the report from a place close to the conflict (Turkey) and the fact that the report was clear and short; however, the horizon of expectations for this news item was rather high.

No victim from the targeted territory was presented, no damaged places were shown. We have seen only that there was bombing but who shot whom, what was destroyed is not clear. [M3, 36 yrs, jurist, Cahul, urban, RO]

***I need more proof, but I do not know what kind of proof. For me it was not sufficient, the report could have been filmed anywhere.***

[F1, 25 yrs, factory operator, Balti, urban, RU]

***Probably Russia's confirmation is necessary saying yes, we bombed there, or at least the Russian point of view.***

[M4, 27 yrs, teacher-coordinator, Balti, urban, RU]

In general, in the eyes of some participants, the CNN news had positive features such as a clear and short report, credible information and a neutral approach. Also, these respondents appreciated the reporting from a place rather close to events, the video images and the fact that several points of view were expressed. Also, the alleged emotive way of reporting was considered a sincere approach.

Those who emphasized the negative features of the CNN report considered that the video images were not clear and that the message was not clearly expressed: one thing is said, but other things are implied. These respondents also considered that the views of other states were not presented and the presence of emotions was a weakness; that the conclusion was made for the public; that the material lacked proof and that there was a manipulative intent.

The first reactions after watching the Russian news item provided a diversity of perspectives.

- It is a demonstration of Russian's power and advanced military weapons.
- There was no word about the victims.
- It is a justification of Russia's position.
- It is too long, too much information.
- It is like a report for the Russian tax payers.
- It is news by the book with proof and different points of view.
- The information presented is contradictory.
- It was manipulation and propaganda.

Further discussion made the differences in the perception of the news more visible. A considerable number of discussants considered that the news from the Russian channel was convincing because it contained all components of good news; however, some of them tried to add that it was convincing for the man on the street/ordinary citizen who would not be able to detect the manipulative elements.

***It was convincing. For the man on the street it was convincing. An intelligent man will understand to whom and with which purpose this information is addressed, but not a man from the countryside.***

[F3, 41 yrs, public servant, Cahul, urban, RO]



**The political interest of the country was presented so convincingly and at a such high level. One can believe that is the truth.**

[F1, 41 yrs, director gymnasium, Singerei, rural, RO]

**You want to trust in the news because it analyses the situation from different perspectives and with high officials. So, at first sight this news item looks more credible than the American one.**

[F4, 23 yrs, educator, Balti, urban, RU]

**I liked the fact that the opposing point of view was present, that is, that Russian missiles miss the targets, and this information was provided.**

[M2, 25 yrs, unemployed, Balti, urban, RU]

**I liked this news visually. I liked what I have seen, but I did not like the content, what the technique and the planes are called, how they function. Too much information and I was bored.**

[F3, 25 yrs, human resources manager/inspector, Chisinau, urban, RO]

Some of the participants argued that the news did not convince them because they felt manipulated and that propaganda was perceivable.

**It is not convincing because they are trying hard to show that Russians are doing a good thing there.**

[M1, 55 yrs, unemployed, Singerei, rural, RO]

**The second news item manipulated me more. I like when news is succinct and short. The second item was interesting at the beginning, but after that my interest disappeared. Too much information and too long a story.**

[F3, 22 yrs, student, Chisinau, urban, RO]

**I notice that all reporting done by the Russian media is based on emotions and sentiments in order to provoke them in the audience as well. There is no objectivity. If they appeal to emotions, the people will say: "God, how true is this news!" but this is just not correct.**

[M1, 28 yrs, teacher, Orhei, rural, RO]

**I did not like the fact that Putin was talking more than the Minister of Defence. The minister has to talk more because this is his field... Here you can see who is the boss and who manipulates whom.**

[F1, 24 yrs, working with youth initiative, Orhei, rural, RO]

In general, the positive aspects attributed to the news on the Russian channel were the following:

- clear information;
- presentation of a second point of view;
- made in the spirit of patriotism;
- presentation of technical details;
- lots of videos images in the reporting;
- statements of officials included.



The negative features were the voluminous content, the length of the item, the lack of the position of the other states mentioned, the lack of the position of ordinary citizens, the presentation of the political interests of Russia, that the information was not presented from the site, the appeal to emotions and the use of manipulation and propaganda.

Comparing the Russian and US news, the participants observed that they were different from the point of view of structure and the way of reporting on the event. In general, all agreed that the CNN news approached only one subject—the Russian army bombing in Syria—while the news from the Russian channel contained several subtopics including the Russian army’s technical equipment and a demonstration of how the new missile works. The rest of comparisons were done mainly in terms of which news item manipulated more. The conclusion was that because of the length (10 minutes), the Russian news manipulated more, or in the Russian news “the brainwashing is longer.” [M3, 36 yrs, jurist, Cahul, urban, RO]

There was no unanimity on the perception of either broadcast. Both received contradictory comments from “news done by the book” to manipulation and propaganda. This plurality of perceptions allows the conclusion that participants were filtering the news according to their positions and their world-views. These views and positions are, although not exclusively, the effect of the influence of the mass media available to Moldova’s population and of the mass media they prefer.

Concomitantly, the participants in the focus groups were able to identify manipulation and propaganda in both the CNN and Russian news. The fact that news watching was preceded by a discussion on manipulation and propaganda empowered the participants to be more critical in commenting on the two items. If the focus groups had started with watching the news, the results might have been slightly different or the critical attitude less acute; however, a critical perspective is not incompatible with trust in one broadcaster (even with the unconditional acceptance of one of the items). This is a critical attitude not only as media consumers but also as a critique of an ideological opponent because the respondents were able to detect propaganda in the media they do not usually prefer but did not see it in the media that confirmed their expectations and views. Thus, the capacity to detect manipulation and propaganda turns out to be subjective.

# 5. CONCLUSIONS

## ***Corroboration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data***

The qualitative data reflect only the opinions of the participants at the focus groups and cannot be directly extrapolated to the entire population of the Republic of Moldova; however, the data can be interpreted as trends that require confirmation by a quantitative study. Thus, the corroboration of data obtained from focus group discussions with data obtained from the national survey is necessary for a legitimate interpretation of the opinions of participants as representative of the population as a whole. This comparison shows that most of the findings in the qualitative research are confirmed by quantitative data; however, there are several inconsistencies concerning mainly the contradiction between the critical perception of media and critical mindset displayed by the participants in the focus groups and the survey respondents' considerable trust (46.3 %) in one type of media (TV). The examination of these inconsistencies highlights new, interesting findings about the patterns of media consumption in the Republic of Moldova.

## ***Confirmation of qualitative data by quantitative research***

- Both for the participants at focus groups and for the participants in the national survey, television is the most important source of socio-political information followed by online media/Internet/websites.
- In both studies, different sources of information have their specific publics: Television is preferred especially by people of over 45 while working youth with higher educations in urban areas inform themselves online.
- In both studies these media types were consulted on a daily basis as socio-political sources. In all, 61% of respondents in the national survey spent 1–2 hours per day for this purpose, and 14% spent 3 hours or more per day. The participants at focus groups agreed that they consulted several sources in order to get a more correct view of what is really happening. The proportion of respondents who spent less than an hour was similar to the proportion of the focus group participants who said they consulted mainly one source they trusted. Obviously, this symmetry might not be valid in all situations, and the possibility that 3 or more hours could be allocated for consulting a single source of socio-political information the media consumer trusts cannot be excluded.

- Both the respondents in the national survey and the participants in the focus groups expressed confusion regarding the origin of mass media institutions. For the participants in focus groups, «foreign media» had different meanings. For some of them, foreign media is media from other countries while for others, foreign is mass media either local or geographically more distant that reports reality in the Republic of Moldova subjectively. According to the national survey, many respondents believed that even TV channels in the Republic of Moldova with large audiences are foreign or are cooperating with a foreign media institution.
- The quantitative data confirm and validate the qualitative data in terms of the perception of information level: 10% of participants in the survey considered themselves very informed, and 40% in the perceived information category were quite satisfied. The feeling that people had regarding their degree of information varied and depended on the respondents' level of education and urbanization: People with higher education and a higher level of urbanization considered themselves to be very informed (17%) or quite well informed (53%) compared to people with a lower level of education and urbanization: 6% of respondents considered themselves to be very informed and 28% - quite well informed. In the focus groups as well, the participants with higher levels of education and urbanization expressed a critical attitude as media consumers and a higher degree of media literacy than people from rural areas with lower levels of education.
- The corroboration of qualitative by quantitative data confirms that the preferences of the participants at focus groups regarding local media and foreign media are representative trends for the entire population of the Republic of Moldova. Citizens take information mainly from Moldovan mass media followed by sources from Russian media (36 %) and Romanian media (14%). EU and US media were followed by only a few participants in the focus group discussions and by 2% of respondents in the survey.
- The role and functions of the media were similarly perceived by the participants in the survey and in the focus groups. Thus, the prime role of the media is to present all events that are taking place, to be a watchdog, to educate and to explain the world around us. The proportion of the persons considering that mass media does not perform these role and functions properly was higher among participants in the focus groups.

### ***Inconsistencies between qualitative and quantitative data***

The main inconsistency between the data provided by the quantitative research and the data provided by the qualitative research concerns the trust in the Russian media expressed by 46.3% of respondents to the survey and the

critical mindset and the ability to detect propaganda in mass media messages expressed by the majority of focus group participants. These inconsistencies are rather apparent and an analysis reveals and confirms a rather coherent pattern of media consumption in Moldova. Two aspects have to be clarified in this context.

Firstly, the inconsistency, if one exists, is also an inconsistency in the results of the survey. In all, 70% of the respondents stated that media manipulates or uses propaganda (41% Yes; 29% Sometimes), a figure that includes at least some of the 46.3% who expressed trust in Russian media. Additionally, a more specific contradiction is revealed when comparing the country assessments in terms of media manipulation. From this angle, Russian media appear to be the second most manipulative as declared by 60% of respondents (interestingly, the most manipulative was considered to be Moldovan media which, however, contain various news programs in Russian or produced in Russia). Secondly, the very fact of noticing a certain contradiction is conditioned by an assumption of the analyst/interpreter that one cannot concomitantly have a critical mindset and trust the Russian media. The fact that in recent years and following the dramatic developments of 2014—the political crisis in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, the Western sanctions imposed on Russia, and the armed conflict in Ukraine’s east—Russian media make more use of manipulation and propaganda is a fact described and analyzed by media experts and researchers (see the introduction to this report). Under these conditions, a critical mindset and an awareness of propaganda seem less compatible with trust in Russian media which is why an analysis of this inconsistency is necessary.

Therefore, what are the explanations for this (apparent) inconsistency? First, it shows the specificity of the focus group discussion as a method. The participants in focus group sessions interacted in a way that is crucial for this type of research. As mentioned before, the participants frequently used expressions such as “As my colleague said,” “as he affirmed,” “I agree with,” “The same here,” “Me too/I also,” and other similar expressions. Most of these affirmations concerned the way in which a critical attitude towards media was expressed. The participants implicitly expressed a general acceptance and a tacit consensus that it is good to be critical of mass media, to display a critical attitude in the perception of media content and to have skills to critically analyze media. Obviously, some participants in the focus groups were more critical than others, so they played a dominant role in shaping the discussion (for the conditions for creating a critical media consumer in the Republic of Moldova, see the following analysis). This interaction provided a new level of media consumption for 100 minutes (the duration of a focus group discussion) that does not necessarily correspond to the real picture of the participants as media consumers. Indeed, one central theme in the current criticism of focus group research is that participants say one thing and do another. This problem is not unique to focus groups and also arises in survey research; however, the interaction of participants during the focus group session is important as a research finding because it reveals the participants’ perception of the “ideal” behavior of a media consumer, that is, a critical media consumer.

Secondly, being a critical media consumer in the Republic of Moldova (but probably not only in Moldova) is a rather demanding activity, so the conditions for creating a critical attitude towards mass media have to be specified. One condition can be called a structural one: A critical mindset and attitude are, at

least partially, shaped and determined by the structure and landscape of Moldovan mass media. Since the beginnings of media in Moldova, that is, since the creation of the Republic of Moldova as a state, it was structurally impossible for unified national mass media to create a single community. Divided between Romanian-oriented and Moldovan-oriented mass media in the 1990s and with the significant presence of Russian media in the landscape, mass media in Moldova offered a plurality of messages and points of view but as a general picture and not as a feature of the same media outlet. The possibility of choosing one type of mass media or another had the potential to generate the critical awareness that a media source offers only the partial truth. So, citizens looking for a more correct picture of reality had to scrutinize a plurality of media outlets. The structural impossibility of having the truth from one media source has increased with the Internet/online media. Thus, it could be said that critical Moldovan media consumers learned to evaluate media messages based on their own experiences and skills. They learned how to discover the parts of the story that are not being told and how to recognize bias, spin or misinformation.

Concomitantly, demands to be critical come from mass media and journalists themselves. As the participants in the focus groups observed, often journalists from a media outlet/TV channel critique the work of journalists from another media outlet, claiming that they manipulate by promoting the interests of one politician or another. This makes the work of a critical media consumer rather demanding and time consuming. Both qualitative and quantitative data show that some respondents/participants spend 2–3 hours daily scrutinizing the whole media landscape in order to find out what is really happening from the bits of truth provided by different sources. Nevertheless, 4.7% of respondents to the survey felt misinformed and 43% considered themselves poorly informed in spite of the plurality of media sources. In addition, some of the participants in the focus groups affirmed that the diversity of media and plurality of (media) voices created a sensation of anomy (and even cacophony). Furthermore, not all media consumers are able to spend the time and effort needed for achieving and exercising critical thinking in consuming mass media, including socio-political news. Even the more critically oriented consumers are caught between a critical mindset and the temptation to embrace the belief that one media outlet is telling the challenging and conveyable truth.

Thirdly, a critical attitude towards media can be rather subjective and selective as the perception of US mass media by the focus group participants shows. According to the results of the survey, mass media from US is followed daily by 2% of the population; the proportion of the participants at focus groups following the US media was similar. This did not, however, stop participants from stating that US media manipulates, the only difference being the fact that US media manipulates at a more advanced and refined level than Moldovan and Russian media which manipulate more simply/primitively. Also, the perception of some participants at the focus groups that the US/CNN news attempted to manipulate while the Russian news on the same topic was more convincing reveals that the ability/capacity to detect manipulation and propaganda is selective. One claims that there is propaganda in the mass media she/he does not prefer/like/accept but without seeing the manipulative elements in the media she/he prefers or trusts. Therefore, this is not only a critical attitude expressed by media consumers but also a critique of the ideological opponent. Thus, the part of the Moldovan audience that detects elements of manipula-



tion and propaganda in mass media but nevertheless trusts Russian media is not completely free from the current antagonism nurtured by the anti-Western propaganda from the Russian media that has accompanied the crisis in Ukraine since its onset in late 2013. The Russian mass media, in addition to its critique and moral condemnation of the “Euroatlantic” countries, criticises as well the Western mass media for using manipulation and propaganda. So, the apparent incompatibility between a critical mindset and awareness of propaganda on one hand and trust in Russian mass media on the other is dissolved but at the price of reducing a critical attitude toward media to a subjective, selective and, why not, a manipulative tool in itself.

This does not mean that a genuine critical attitude and critical thinking do not exist in the Moldovan media audience. As the focus group discussions show, there are media consumers who always prefer the relentless pursuit of evidence and unyielding arguments to a comforting and easy truth.

### ***Russia-originated messages vs US-originated messages in the Moldovan media content***

The corroboration of qualitative and quantitative data confirm the findings of the focus group research concerning the perception of Russia-originated messages versus US-originated messages in Moldovan media content. Thus, these findings can be legitimately considered as trends representative of the entire population of Moldova.

According to the results of the survey, mass media from the US is followed by 2% of the population daily, while the media from Russia – by 36%. The proportion of the participants in the focus groups that followed US media was similar. Thus, a comparison of the perception of Russia-originated messages and US-originated messages in Moldovan media is rather difficult or even impossible. Direct messages from US media are not very present in Moldova compared with those originated in Russian media which is the dominant foreign media (Russian mass media is followed daily by 36% of respondents, second after local Moldovan media followed daily by 68%; in the third place is mass media from Romania followed daily by 14 % of respondents). The explanation of the dominance of the Russian message is obvious and rather well known, and the survey respondents and participants in the focus groups confirmed it once more. The Russian speaking population in Moldova chooses Russian media—both Russian media programs produced in Moldova and Russian media broadcasted/published in Russia—because of language accessibility. The Romanian speaking audience chooses Russian media for several different reasons, i.e., because of the traditions and habits in their families, because it confirms their position and world view, because of the (alleged) professionalism of Russian journalists and others.

Furthermore, a determining factor for the influence of Russian media is its omnipresence and availability to the Moldovan audience. Neither the survey nor the focus group discussions included a question about why the audience does not choose US media more frequently; therefore, the explanation of this fact is only indirect as deduced from respondents/participants reasoning and criteria for choosing a source of information. Thus, US media is still less acces-



sible in terms of language both for the Russian and Romanian speaking audiences, although English is becoming more accessible for younger generations. Another obstacle is the rather modest visibility and presence of US media for Moldovan consumers: the only US channel included in the offers of cable TV providers is CNN. Obviously, US media is available for Internet users in Moldova; however, for the time being, this fact has not increased the number of followers of US media among Moldovan media consumers.

The comparison of the direct presence of Russian-originated and US-originated messages in Moldovan media content was therefore substituted with a comparison of perceptions of a US-originated news item and a Russian one on the same topic by the participants in focus groups. Also, five questions from the national survey concerned the role of the US and the role of Russia in world politics. The answers of respondents to these questions and the analysis of the news by the participants in focus groups were similar and confirmed/validated each other. Asked what in their opinion is Russia's role in maintaining stability in the world, 40.4% of respondents considered that Russia is a factor in stability and guarantor of peace, 20% considered that it is a destabilizing factor, 25.8% considered that it is neither a guarantor of stability nor a destabilizing factor, and 13.2% did not know the role of Russia. In comparison, asked about the US role, only 13.0% of the respondents considered that the US is a factor of stability/guarantor of peace, 33.4% considered that the US is a destabilizing factor, 28.3 % believe that it is neither a guarantor of stability nor a destabilizing factor, while 25.2% were not able to evaluate the role of the US. As we can see, the proportion of those who see in Russia as a factor in global stability is close to the number of respondents who trust Russian media (46.3 %). This number is also proportional with the number of participants in the focus group who found the Russian news more convincing than CNN news.

Although the majority of survey respondents and focus group participants affirmed that they do not access/consult US-originated sources of information, the fact that they were willing to comment and express their views on US media is not without significance. As the perceptions of the focus group participants show, most consider that US media manipulates although in a more advanced way (thus admitting a superiority of the US, although a negative one, in comparison with Russia). The audience considers that the US media has certain features and characteristics although they do not follow or watch directly the US media. When a considerable group of participants/respondents considers that the US media manipulates without being able to actually follow it, then instead of manifesting critical thinking as media consumers they reveal an ideological position coherent with the anti-West propaganda developed in recent years by Russian media.

In conclusion, the findings of the quantitative and qualitative research reveal both positive and negative aspects of the perception of the news by the Moldovan audience. The positive aspects concern the following:

- (1)** the critical attitude and critical mindset of the audience in approaching mass media messages;
- (2)** the capacity of a part of the audience to get information from a plurality of sources and to compare the information obtained;

**(3)** the ability of the audience to identify and detect manipulation and propaganda in mass media.

The list of negative aspects is longer; the most obvious aspects that need to be addressed concern the following:

**(1)** the incapacity of some media consumers to differentiate the origins of media, foreign or local;

**(2)** the considerable number of persons who consider themselves disinformed or poorly informed in spite of the plurality of sources in the Moldovan media landscape;

**(3)** the selective and subjective use of a critical attitude in perceiving media messages;

**(4)** the unequal access to mass media from the EU, US and Russia;

**(5)** the trust of a considerable part of the audience in Russian mass media which diminishes their critical attitude in perceiving media messages.

In general, two main themes are prominent in this study of the Moldovan media audience: on the one hand, the perception of manipulation and propaganda not only as obsolete relics of the Cold War but as current realities in mass media and on the other hand, the critical attitude toward media expressed by some of the audience. If the main weapon of media consumers against manipulation and propaganda is critical thinking, then for a genuine critical attitude toward mass media that could empower the individual both as a media consumer and as a citizen, the conditions of equal access to a plurality of original, unmediated media messages has to be created and maintained. This is a common task for media institutions, civil society, public authorities and media regulators that should take into account the recommendations that follow from the findings of this research.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Media regulators**

- Authorities should ensure (both in legislation and in practice) the political and operational independence of the broadcast media regulators in line with the OSCE, EU and Council of Europe's recommendations.<sup>13</sup>
- Media regulators should monitor *ex officio* broadcasters' compliance with legislation and contractual licensing conditions, and in cases of non-compliance they should apply appropriate sanctions. Sanctions should be clearly defined and commensurate with the gravity of the violation committed. The establishment of systematic media monitoring based on a credible methodology would assist the regulators to identify legal violations (including hate speech and propaganda) and to take prompt and adequate corrective action.
- Consideration could be given to strengthening the protection of national airways against propaganda for war and hatred that breaches the law. At the same time, if applied, restrictions on the freedom of expression should not be disproportional in scope and should not be arbitrary or politically motivated to limit the expression of alternative positions.
- The existence of an independent, vibrant and competitive media landscape is a key factor for providing a variety of news and views in different languages coming from different countries but with priority given to high-quality programs produced in national languages. A national media enjoying a high level of trust and popularity would serve as a good tool against any kind of media propaganda.
- The ongoing monopolization of the media market by state or powerful groups has deprived the audience of an effective variety of sources of information and has thereby weakened the guarantees of pluralism. Such undue concentration of media ownership should be prevented through appropriate measures. Instruments could be applied to improve competition, to motivate the old players to get rid of excess concentration, and to encourage new players to invest.
- Given the overall lack of high-quality reporting, consideration should be given to supporting activities aimed at raising professional standards, including adherence to internationally recognized ethical codes

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<sup>13</sup> See the Council of Europe's recommendation on the independence and functions of regulatory authorities for broadcasting sector at [http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/media/doc/cm/rec%282000%29023&expmem\\_EN.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/media/doc/cm/rec%282000%29023&expmem_EN.asp).

and standards for balanced and objective reporting and news presentation. This should include support for already existing media outlets (both local and foreign) that provide high-quality reporting and seek alternative information.

### ***Public service broadcasting***

- In this respect, the existence of truly independent public service broadcasters that would develop impartial editorial practices is essential. It is therefore important for the authorities to strengthen and respect the mandate of the public service broadcaster so it reflects the public interest and is based on sustainability, independence, editorial freedom and non-interference by authorities or political parties.
- The reporting by these broadcasters should be balanced, diverse and factual including when covering foreign policies and topics in line with strong professional standards and good international practice.

### ***Media professionalism***

- The media should refuse all blatant or veiled expressions of intolerance and should consider thoughtfully if the publication of such expressions is not conducive to defamation or ridicule based on sex, race, color, language, faith and religion, affiliation with a national or ethnic minority or ethnic group, social differences or political or other opinions.
- The media should avoid broadcasting a message based on unverified information or rumors with an intention to create a scandal or for propaganda purposes. If it decides that such a message is somehow important despite the fact that it can't be verified, it should broadcast it with a warning saying that the message has not been verified. An important criterion is to separate facts from commentary.
- Journalists, editors, producers and proprietors should spare no effort to make any information disseminated correspond with the truth and with reality. The facts should be stated without any distortion and in their respective context. If a flawed message is published, it should be followed by an immediate apology.
- The media should not manipulate pictures or audio so that the choice of words or other means of expression changes the tone, shifts the stress or deliberately alters the meaning or value of the message. The media should ensure that every news item contains only facts corresponding to reality and whose veracity will be verified by independent sources quoted therein.

## ***Media and Internet literacy***

- Consideration could be given to further enhancing existing platforms and to creating new ones for discussion, training, studies and self-reflection on the media, including in the regions, to enhance the current level of the profession of journalism and to explain the unhealthy aspects of journalism such as propaganda.
- Access to various educational resources such as books, databases, methodologies, research magazines as well as a chance to exchange experiences through international media networks and journalistic associations would also help in achieving these efforts.
- Strengthening educational programs on media and Internet literacy including investments in and support for media studies at the high school level would facilitate an informed population. This would help journalists, managers and students to increase their professional capacities and would also improve the current level of media literacy.

## ***International media content***

- Local as well as local branches of international media outlets should be encouraged to provide high-quality reporting also in non-official and state languages in order to be more accessible to viewers and listeners.
- Consideration should be given to promoting a direct exchange of high-quality media content among broadcasters within certain closer frameworks based on mutual links such as history, language or territorial proximity, for example with the Eastern Partnership countries, with Romania or with Ukraine.
- Current international networks and platforms such as the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) or the European Platform of Regulatory Authorities (EPRA) should play a more active role in providing a forum for discussion of practical solutions to legal problems regarding the interpretations and application of media regulation as well as promoting and developing the concept of public service media and their values such as universality, independence, excellence, diversity, accountability and innovation as referred to in the EBU Declaration on the Core Values of the Public Service Media.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See the EBU statutes at: [https://www3.ebu.ch/files/live/sites/ebu/files/About/Governance/Statutes%202013\\_EN.pdf](https://www3.ebu.ch/files/live/sites/ebu/files/About/Governance/Statutes%202013_EN.pdf)







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