



Centrul pentru Jurnalism Independent



## **Monitoring Report No. 5**

### ***Elements of Propaganda, Information Manipulation and Violation of Journalism Ethics in the Local Media Space***

***February 1, 2017- April 1, 2017***

*The report was developed by the Independent Journalism Center within the **Media campaign against false and biased information -STOP FALS!**, conducted by the Association of Independent Press (API), Independent Journalism Center (IJC) and Association of Independent TV Journalists (ATVJI).*

## I. GENERAL INFORMATION

From 1 February 2017 to 1 April 2017, the Independent Journalism Center monitored 12 media institutions – news portals and TV channels, to identify whether the broadcast journalistic materials contained violations of deontological rules and/or elements of informational manipulation. IJC analyzed how these media outlets reflected events of public interest in politics, the economy, and foreign policy; if they respected the journalistic rules on verification of information from several sources and diversity of opinions in order to ensure the balance of the conflict news, etc. Invoking the Journalist's Ethical Code and scientific reference works allowed the IJC to detect methods and techniques used by Moldovan media outlets to influence the wider public by spreading manipulating messages.

### *The Purpose of Monitoring*

To establish whether the media, in addressing issues of public interest, respected professional ethics or used techniques of manipulation - and to identify those processes. Monitoring also aimed to expose the mistakes of journalists, deliberate or not, in fact stating, so that case studies and reports would have an instructive role. Another purpose of the monitoring was to help increase media consumers awareness of the risks of unsafe information sources. Thus, the monitoring helps consumers to understand how the media can manipulate, to be able to distinguish between a manipulative journalistic story and a story that covers reality in an equidistant way.

### *The selection criteria of the media outlets monitored were:*

- Coverage area – national;
- Language: Romanian and Russian;
- Impact – circulation and audience.

### *Media outlets monitored:*

**Broadcast media** - Publika TV (news on the website Publika.md), Prime TV, Jurnal TV, Accent TV, RTR (newscasts prepared in Republic of Moldova), REN TV;

**Online press** - Ziarulnațional.md, Pan.md; Gagauzinfo.md, Novostipmr.com, Sputnik.md, Deschide.md.

### *Methodology*

The reported focused on political, economic and social events of major public interest these that occurred during the monitoring period, and analyzed the way the media covered events. IJC investigated language and images used by journalists, the way they selected events to cover, accuracy of source quoting, tone of exposure etc., - all, in the light of the Journalist's Ethical Code<sup>1</sup>, of guidelines and recommendations on

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<sup>1</sup> Moldovan Journalist Code of Ethics, [http://consiliuldepresa.md/fileadmin/fisiere/documente/cod\\_d\\_rom.pdf](http://consiliuldepresa.md/fileadmin/fisiere/documente/cod_d_rom.pdf)

high quality and responsible media<sup>2</sup>, and with respect to **manipulation** and **propaganda definitions**, as determined by the Dictionary of Sociology<sup>3</sup>.

**Manipulation:** *"the act of making a social actor (person, group, community) think and act in a manner compatible with the interests of the initiator and not with his/her interests, by using persuasion techniques that intentionally distort the truth giving the impression of freedom of thought and decision. Unlike the influence of the rational persuasion type, manipulation is aimed not to a more accurate and deeper understanding of the situation but to imprinting in the mind of a convenient understanding, falling back both on the misleading by using forged arguments and on the emotional non-rational levels'."*

**Propaganda:** *"the systematic activity of transmission, promotion or dissemination of doctrines, theses or ideas from the standpoint of a particular social group and ideologies, in order to influence, change, form concepts, attitudes, opinions, beliefs and behaviors. The propaganda is performed in such way as to lead to the realization of the goals and interests of the group it serves, and there is no value-neutral or objective propaganda."*

**Main subjects monitored between 1 February 2017 and 1 April 2017:**

- Price increase of medical services for persons without health care insurance;
- The proposal of PDM leader, Vlad Plahotniuc, to introduce a single member constituency system;
- Parliamentary debates on the bill providing for the change to a single-member constituency system;
- Approval in the final reading of the bill on amending Broadcasting code.
- Approval in the first reading of the bill on lifting MPs immunity.

## **II. GENERAL TRENDS**

Monitoring data shows that some journalistic materials created contained deviation from the deontological rules. The following elements featuring information manipulation, propaganda practices, and infringements of the Code of Ethics were identified:

**Ignorance** during newscasts and in news building - Publika TV, Prime TV, Accent TV (all three in news stories on medical services);

**One sided coverage of the issue** – Publika TV, Prime TV (in news reports on single-member constituency);

**Quoting anonymous experts** – Publika TV, Prime TV (in news reports on single-member constituency);

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<sup>2</sup> Style Guidelines Containing the Ethical Rules for Journalists, API, [http://www.unicef.org/moldova/Ghid\\_Etica\\_Jurnalist\\_RO.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/moldova/Ghid_Etica_Jurnalist_RO.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Catalin Zamfir, Lazar Vlasceanu, Dictionary of Sociology, Bucharest, 1998, p.332, p.457. <http://vignette4.wikia.nocookie.net/nccmn/images/1/1c/Dictionar-de-Sociologie-Catalin-Zamfir-Lazar-Vlasceanu.pdf/revision/latest?cb=20150813042511&path-prefix=ro>

**Facts Opinions combined with facts** - Accent TV, Publika TV (in news stories on single-member constituency);

**Selective presentation of the facts** - Accent TV, Publika TV (in news stories on single-member constituency and on Broadcasting code amendment);

**Generalization** - Publika TV (in news stories about Moldovans supporting change of election system and Diaspora welcoming PDM initiative to introduce single-member constituency).

**Propaganda** – Publika TV, Prime TV (in news reports on single-member constituency);

**Truncating and taking quotes out of context** - Publika TV, Prime TV (in news stories on single-member constituency and on lifting MPs immunity);

**Distortion, through text, of messages of the source**, -Publika TV (in news on on lifting MPs immunity);

**Labelling** - "fugitive criminal Renato Usatîi" (Publika TV), "the oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc" (Jurnal TV).

### III. DATA ANALYSIS

#### 1. Price increase of medical services for persons without health care insurance<sup>4</sup>

On 10 February 2017, the Government amended the [Registry of unique tariffs for health care services](#), by increasing prices for persons without healthcare insurance. The press took up this subject only on 20 February; most media outlets covered the issue in their news reports during 20-24 February. On 20, 21 and 22 February, when discussions on increased prices on health care gained momentum in society and press, **Publika TV** did not report on the subject. Only on 23 February, when the Minister of Healthcare issued [a press release](#), and socialist MPs and supporters organized a protest at the Healthcare Ministry, demanding cancellation of tariff increases and resignation of minister Ruxanda Glavan, did **Publika.md** post one news story on this matter; [Minister of Healthcare: 86 % of population will have access to free of charge medical service](#). Journalists did not bother to inform the public about price increases and the reasons for them, but limited themselves to presenting Minister's standpoint only, publishing the full text of the press release. Other pieces of information on this matter, including the protest by the socialists, were **ignored**.

**Publika** presented a short news item on this issue the next day as well, on 24 February. Both online and during televised broadcasts, it presented only Ruxanda Glavan's reaction towards socialists' discontent; [Healthcare Minister, Ruxanda Glavan: Socialists' Motion, CHEAP POPULISM](#). The TV channel sidestepped the subject to protect the image of Minister Glavan, who, in this case,

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<sup>4</sup>Case study, <http://mediacritica.md/ro/?s=studiu+de+caz>

had to face an "unpleasant" situation. Moreover, Publika TV, in its broadcasts, completely ignored the information about [the press release of National Healthcare Insurance Company \(NHIC\)](#) issued on 21 February, where the company provided explanations for the price increases.

**Prime TV** also **ignored** this subject in its daily agenda and bypassed several relevant details of the news report. The channel aired only one news piece on 23 February, which briefly reported on the clarifications of Healthcare Minister from her own press release. Other pieces of information, including on socialists' protest, were missing.

**Accent TV** aired a news story on 22 February that contained several minor comments of the reporter: *"It looks like institutional modernization in the Republic of Moldova begins rather with price increases than with reforms"*. On 23 February, the TV channel aired a comprehensive [report](#) on the socialists' protest in front of the building of Healthcare Ministry; however, this coverage **ignored** the response of Healthcare Ministry that was expressed in a press release issued earlier that day.

Other media monitored, including *Deschide.md* or *Ziarulnational.md*, covered the issue in several news stories in detail and with different points of view. E.g.: ["DOC/The State "makes us ill" with new prices for health care services. At a dentist's office, the health insurance is of no use"](#); ["SPRM will file a simple motion. I demand to put down Ruxanda Glavan"](#) (Deschide.md); ["Important. Prices for health care services in hospitals increased by several times"](#), ["Case study: The way prices for health care were increased ON THE QUIET"](#) (Ziarulnational.md).

## **2. The proposal of PDM leader, Vlad Plahotniuc, to introduce single member constituency system<sup>5</sup>**

On 6 March 2017, leader of Democratic Party, Vladimir Plahotniuc, announced that his party would submit a bill on amendment of Election Code pursuing to change the system of electing MPs: shifting from party lists to single-member districts.

News reports on *Publika* and *Prime*, covered the subject from a single stand point, focusing exclusively on positive aspects of the amendment. News stories that employed election propaganda techniques were: ["WHAT SINGLE-MEMBER CONSTITUENCY VOT IS. Details that each citizen must be aware of "](#) (Publika, 6 March); ["National campaign for signature collection in favor of single-member constituency began. What people say"](#) (Publika, 9 March). For instance, on the first day the initiative was launched, six news stories about the proposal of Vladimir Plahotniuc, most of them accompanied by video, were posted on **Publika.md** portal. There were two more news items: one about the reaction of Igor Dodon and a few MPs, and the other one ["Citizens support the initiative on single-member constituency and dismissal of MPs."](#) In total, seven "positive" news stories that promote the initiative, and one with feedback about it. From 7 March, on a daily basis one to three news stories promoting a single-member constituency, without

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<sup>5</sup><http://mediacritica.md/ro/studiu-de-caz-lansarea-de-catre-liderul-pdm-vladimir-plahotniuc-initiativei-de-introducere-votului-uninominal/>

presenting controversial opinions were posted to the **Publika.md** portal. Based on the definitions in the Dictionary of Sociology[1], it can be concluded that this systematic repetition and persistent promotion of the idea that single-member constituency is an exclusively beneficial matter for Republic of Moldova - is a sample of **propaganda**.

As well, it was found that news stories on **Publika** cited **anonymous experts**, which is a manipulation technique. In news item "[PLDM Leader, Viorel Cibotaru, about single-member constituency: It is a more human feature, it will bring personalities to the Parliament](#)," aired on 7 March, it said: "**Political observers claim that each of the three politicians have their own interests to reject amendment of the election system:** Andrei Năstase criticized anything coming from Vlad Plahotniuc, Maia Sandu doesn't have a team across the country, thus the chances of anybody on behalf of PAS to getting into Parliament diminish; and Viorel Cibotaru is interested in preserving the existing system, which proved to be a vicious one, hoping to make an election block with PAS and PPDA, to maintain PLDM in the Parliament." The fact that "observers" are not given a name and aren't precisely quoted - when exactly and what exactly they said, proves that it was intended to convey an opinion (that may be reporter's opinion), shedding negative light on opponents of the idea of introducing single-member constituency. Reporters of this media outlet, as well produced a *vox populi* with **selective opinions** based on the message, contrary to the principle of opinion diversity, and **generalized** without justification: "[Citizens support the initiative on single-member constituency and dismissal of MPs](#)" (6 March); "[Diaspora welcomes PDM initiative to introduce single-member constituency during parliamentary elections](#)" (8 March). In both news stories, only positive opinions featured, both in the title and in the generalized text. The statements in the title aren't accurate, because, according to opinion polls, not all "citizens support", and in the second news story, no interviewed person spoke on behalf of the entire diaspora.

Also on [Accent TV](#), its newscast on 6 March quoted anonymous experts, however with a different purpose, to blame the PDM initiative: "For a long time experts predicted this scenario, stressing it as the only feasible way for the Democratic Party to stay in power." "The Experts" are cited once more in a news report on 7 March: "To note that this isn't the first attempt of the government to promote "weired", **as qualified by the experts**, initiatives. Moreover, in the news item broadcast on 6 March in several cases **opinions were mixed with the facts:** "He promised that Democratic Party would be closer to people, **and after he took his mask off**, he announced the main news." Same technique was employed by reporter in the text of the news story broadcast by [Accent TV](#) on 7 March: "Socialist Party in Republic of Moldova said a solid "No" to the perspective of further remaining under **the thumb of PDM regime**".

[Accent TV](#) and [Sputnik.md](#) covered the subject with selective presentation of opinions about PD's initiative. In the news stories disseminated by [Sputnik.md](#) only Igor Dodon's point of view was presented, even though several leaders of parliamentary fractions or of opposition parties made statements on that matter on the same day.



### 3. Parliamentary debates on the bill providing for change to single-member constituency<sup>6</sup>

The first Parliamentary debate about the Election Code amendment took place on 31 March 2017. Several media outlets covered this event with deviations from the Ethics Code and employed techniques of information manipulation.

This subject was also covered through **one-sided presentation of opinions**, combined with generalizations and selection. On *Publika* and *Canal 3*, presenters introduced the news reports on this matter with the following phrases: "Today parliament organized first public debates on the bill pursuing the introduction of single-member constituency. **Participants discussed the advantages of changing the election system and citizens' expectations from the political class.**" This is a one-sided approach and reflects a selective presentation of the facts, as not all participants spoke about "the advantages of changing the election system." By generalizing one sentence in this [news story](#) on *PublikaTV*, the statement became false: "Civil society representatives believe that implementation of single-member constituencies will grant access to Parliament for people loyal to the country." In fact, at least six participants at the debate, whose opinions were covered in news reports by other media than *Publika*, stated they were against single-member constituency system.

Journalists from *Publika* were also blamed for **truncating quotes** in this news story, aiming to change the statement meaning. By cutting off a sequence from Nicolae Panfil's discourse, "Promo-Lex" representative, held during the debate, the meaning of his message was denatured. "Promo-Lex" organization put forward arguments to request the withdrawal of bill on single-member constituencies. However, the news story featured Panfil expressing an opinion favoring the bill: "Yes, we have to realize and voice it: the opinion poll commissioned by "Promo-Lex" confirm the fact that citizens perceive a need and an opportunity in changing the election system." A few days later "Promo-Lex" reported that their message was distorted and they issued a [press release](#) containing [the full discourse](#), including the truncated sequence.

Several media institutions - *Accent TV*, in their [newscast](#) on 31 March and *Sputnik.md* ignored the subject about the parliamentary debate in their news programs. Other media outlets **ignored relevant elements of the news story**. *Publika* and three TV channels from GMG group - *Prime*, *Canal 2* and *Canal 3* - ignored at least one significant fact: The Head of "Transparency International Moldova", Lilia Carașciuc, left the debate, as a sign of protest, after she held her discourse criticizing the initiative. Selection and ignorance of facts aimed to hide from viewers or readers that there is a strong resistance from active civil society organizations towards the bill proposed by PDM.

The TV channels, also employed **labeling** when covering the debate- "fugitive criminal Renato Usatâi" (*Publika TV*), "the oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc" (*Jurnal*

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<sup>6</sup>Case Study, <http://mediacritica.md/ro/studiu-de-caz-dezbateri-parlament-proiectului-de-lege-care-prevede-introducerea-votului-pe-circumscripții-uninomiale/>

**TV**) and mixed facts with opinions: "While most parliamentary and extra-parliamentary parties debated the the bill, several members of "Our Party" lead by fugitive criminal Renato Usatâi, **also this time preferred to make a scandal** and protested in front of the Parliament" (*PublikaTV* and *Canal 3*).

The above mentioned techniques employed by **Publika, Prime, Canal 3** and **Canal 2** - promoted exclusively the advantages of single-member constituency system, while excluding the opinions about the disadvantages of this initiative, all together served as **propaganda** within the campaign of introducing single-member constituency system, proposed by Democratic Party in Moldova.

#### **4. Approval in the final reading of the bill on amending Broadcasting code.<sup>7</sup>**

On 30 March 2017, Parliament approved the bill on the Broadcasting Code amendment that binds TV stations to air eight hours a day of national content, six of them to be aired during prime-time. Earlier on, several TV stations criticized this provision, which was also put forward to public opinion in 2015, claiming that by removing highly popular programs from their viewing grid, they would lose advertising clients. As well as that, they argued that TV channels without secure funding from owners - persons or groups, will face unfair competition, as they wouldn't be able to afford to produce a large volume of their own programs. Several media experts expressed their concern of the risks entailed by this bill.

Both *Publika TV* and *Accent TV* - channels owned by persons or groups related to PDM, and PSRM, respectively, - covered exclusively the parts considered positive of the bill, and ignored critical opinions. Moreover, the opinion of concerned stakeholders was not requested - owners or managers of TV and radio stations. *Publika TV* presented only the government's position, though AndrianCandu's statement, and the standpoint of several Opposition representatives expressed on that day, were **ignored** by the channel. Vadim Pistrinciuc, PLDM MP, *stated for journalists* that the bill wouldn't solve the problem of information security in Republic of Moldova, on the contrary it would strengthen the presence in the media market of two monopolies - media groups related to PDM and PSRM. As well, according to *Ethics Code*, journalists must request the opinion of "all parties involved in the matter" (p.2.2), in this case of owners and managers of broadcast media outlets. Earlier on, several of these managers, along with media organizations, criticized this bill. A news item with similar content about Broadcasting Code amendment was aired by *Prime*.

*Accent TV* emphasized in its report that in particular, the amendments to Broadcasting Code proposed by socialists were approved. The opinion of MPs who voted against the bill and of broadcasters was ignored. Everything was presented as an exclusive success of socialists, "who were persistent" and obtained four hours of locally produced content in "state language" and two hours in Russian.

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<sup>7</sup>Case Study, <http://mediacritica.md/ro/studiu-de-caz-adoptarea-lectura-finala-proiectului-de-lege-cu-privire-la-modificarea-codului-audiovizualului/>



**RTR Moldova**, in its news program in Russian at 19.45, aired a news story detailing the amendments and the way in which they will be applied. Journalists reminded that "earlier on, during public hearings, broadcasters stated that these amendments will favor certain channels," however, they **ignored** the opinion of opposing MPs.

## **5. Approval in the first reading of the bill on lifting MPs immunity<sup>8</sup>**

On 30 March 2017, a Parliamentary majority voted in the first reading for a draft amendment to the Constitution pursuing lifting MPs immunity. The opposition MPs criticized the document submitted by Democratic Party, saying that under current circumstances in the Republic of Moldova, such an amendment might create a tool to persecute disturbing MPs.

The news story during the main newscast of the day at **Publika TV**, Newsroom, **distorted the messages of sources**. Reporters included sequences of opinions expressed by MPs during the examination of the bill in the plenary meeting. However, the way reporters introduced some quotes, distorted the original message of MPs Vasile Bolea and Elena Bondarenco, who were against the adoption of this bill. The statements of both Bolea and (especially) Bondarenco, were **truncated and taken out of context**. Reporter of **Publika TV** said: *"Several MPs swore they haven't committed any crimes"*, and inserted the opinion of communist MP Elena Bondarenco: *„I have stolen nothing in my life, I haven't killed anybody, I haven't taken any bribes, I do not disturb my neighbors after 11 PM, I always cross the street on green light and on crossing for pedestrians, and now, without too much fuss, any morning, at a bus stop, without my party colleagues; knowledge, I might be arrested..."*

The intention of the speaker is not to admit the fact that she had not committed any crime, but to mention that once the immunity is lifted, that MPs may be abused. However, this message has been distorted and trunked. As a proof of that is continuation Elena Bondarenco's discourse, aired by **Jurnal TV**: *„...simply, on a beautiful morning, at a bus stop, as MrDiacov suggests, I might be stopped and arrested to become obedient or to give up my seat to an obedient MP. "* In fact, journalists from **Publika** selected sequences that didn't clearly convey the idea expressed by the speaker, and commented what was said as best suited them, thus misleading the audience. Distortion, truncation and taking quotes out of context are not only information manipulation techniques; they are also infringements of Ethics Code, point 2.3 which states: "The journalist shall accurately assign quotations. The quotations shall be precise and in case of partial quotations, the journalist shall be obliged to not distort the message of the person quoted."

Also on **Prime**, a reporter **commented and interpreted** the words of Elena Bondarenco: *"In spite of swearing they had never infringed the law, some MPs hold on to immunity with all their strength."* Other media outlets covered this issue in a more or less impartial manner.

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<sup>8</sup> Case Study, <http://mediacritica.md/ro/studiu-de-caz-proiectul-de-lege-privind-anularea-imunitatii-deputatilor-votat-prima-lectura/>

## CONCLUSIONS

TV channels *Publika TV* and *Prime TV* disseminate, with small exceptions, the same content in their news stories on major public interest events, and especially, on political subjects, presenting facts from a single stand point, favoring the Democratic Party. Their news reports on a single-member constituency system and lifting of MPs immunity employed several manipulation techniques and committed infringements of the Ethics Code including **ignorance, generalization, distortion of the message of the quoted person, truncation of quotes and labelling**.

Both TV stations, *Publika* and *Prime*, broadcast on a daily basis news items on the benefits of single-member constituencies, employing manipulation techniques, thus revealing their involvement in a campaign of political **propaganda**.

In their news programs, *Accent TV* displayed selective coverage of subjects; it shed more light on the Socialist Party activity, and highlighted actions of its representatives, ignoring other opinions and relevant facts. In the case of *Accent TV*—the following deviations were revealed: **one-sided presentation of facts, ignorance, quoting of anonymous experts**.

Unlike the previous monitoring period (December 2016 - January 2017), during February-April 2017, new and more serious forms of information manipulation were employed - **truncation of statements, distortion of the message of the quoted person and taking out of context** - and **propaganda**, usually, this is occurring during election periods.

Monitoring data reveals that journalists are **involved in propaganda campaigns**. As well as this, many journalists employ a selective approach towards facts and opinions; they protect the image of certain politicians instead of providing objective coverage of reality.

Other media institutions than the ones previously mentioned above showed no significant deviations from deontological norms in covering monitored subjects; or depending on their specific focus and area of coverage, they did not include these subjects in their news.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Media institutions and especially journalists should refrain from participating in propaganda campaigns, and report facts in an objective manner, presenting different points of view. Editorial offices must select subjects pursuant to their level of public interest rather than the media owners' interests.

Journalists should give up on dishonest practices of one-sided presentations of facts, truncation of source statements and taking quotes out of context, as these actions not

only mislead media consumers, they also signal lack of professionalism and bad faith, and hamper consumers' trust in press and damage professional reputations.

Managers should stop using their own press institutions as tools for propaganda and promotion of interests, to the detriment of equidistant information of public.

The Coordinating Council on Audiovisual will continue to monitor the way, in which the broadcasting organizations cover the subject of changing the election system by introducing a single-member constituency or a mixed one, to ensure that people are not manipulated, but rather properly and objectively informed about the advantages and disadvantages of these systems.

Media consumers are urged to get information from several media sources, in order to avoid the risk of receiving erroneous and manipulating information.