

Foreign Policy Association together with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung offer you a newsletter on foreign policy and European integration issues of the Republic of Moldova. The newsletter is part of the "Foreign Policy Dialogue" joint Project.

NEWSLETTER

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Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

The newsletter is developed by Mădălin Necșuțu, editor-coordinator

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News in Brief



Thirteen political parties from the Republic of Moldova signed the Pact for Europe on May 26. The document was formulated by the "Together" political bloc - which includes the Dignity and Truth Platform, the Coalition for Unity and Welfare, the Party of Change and the League of Cities and Municipalities. The Signatories of the Pact for Europe assumes the "political commitment to fully contribute to the objective of the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the European Union", "to promote the rule of law, social cohesion and national solidarity around the strategic objective of European integration, putting the public interest above personal, group and party interests", "condemning the war of aggression and the forceful occupation of the territories of sovereign and independent states", the document states. The document is based on the Snagov Pact, a similar document signed in 1995 by all political parties in Romania in which they agreed that regardless of political differences, the country's goals are to join NATO and the European Union. The Republic of Moldova has set 2030 as its EU accession target.



The Moldovan and Romanian military will be able to prepare and participate jointly in missions and operations under the auspices of international organizations, such as the European Union, after the signing in Bucharest, on May 24, of the second Protocol amending the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Moldova and the Government of Romania regarding cooperation in the military field, concluded on April 20, 2012, in Chisinau. The updated document provides for mutual support in the field of training and joint participation in missions and operations under the auspices of international organizations, such as the European Union. The Minister of Defense, Anatolie Nosatîi, paid an official visit to Bucharest, at the invitation of his Romanian counterpart Angel Tîlîvăr. The two officials had a bilateral meeting, during which they discussed the security situation in the Black Sea region and the ways in which Romania could support the Republic of Moldova in the context of increasing resilience to current challenges.



The notion of "treason" will be more clearly regulated in the legislation of the Republic of Moldova, after several PAS deputies submitted an amendment to article 337 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Moldova. The amendment was developed with the aim of strengthening the legal framework in the field of ensuring state security. Accordingly, the aim is to give the provision of "treason" a better clarity. The deputies also propose the introduction of an additional form of treason. It is about giving aid to a foreign state or foreign organizations, which can also be expressed through disinformation campaigns that undermine the sovereignty and security of the state. During the public discussions, deputy Oazu Nantoi emphasized that the danger for the Republic of Moldova comes from Russia, which is an aggressor state, which occupies part of the territory of the Republic of Moldova, keeping its troops on Moldova's territory. In Oazu Nantoi's opinion this is a fundamental difference between Russia and other states, and this must be specified in the context of treason.

The Republic of Moldova: between a powerful mass media and the temptation of censorship



The Republic of Moldova is facing a challenge, but also an important test on how it can reset or reform the media field in a European spirit.

On the one hand, it must remove as much as possible Russian propaganda, an emanation

of the hybrid war waged by Russia against the Republic of Moldova, but also not resort to censorship and close down those media that de facto primarily serve the interests of the Kremlin and organized criminal groups led by fugitive Moldavian oligarchs.

Here we must find the key to an extremely thorny and urgent problem, against the background of a war in the neighbouring Ukraine, but also of the domestic political context that will be dominated this year by presidential elections and a referendum on EU accession.

▶ Meanwhile, the media and advertising market also contracted during the last two years of the war. Advertisers are investing less and less money, which is suffocating the commercial television stations in the Republic of Moldova that want to remain editorially independent and self-sustainable from a financial point of view. The EU understands that at the moment it is almost impossible for these televisions, online portals and print media to survive financially, so substantial aid is directed in this sense.

Without a strong, independent and credible media, the European path of the Republic of Moldova can only be a winding one. Without a strong media, the level of democracy can only be low, while the uninformed citizens, or worse - misinformed, can only form a society that is extremely weakly resilient in the face of internal and external informational manipulations.

That is why it is vital that the Republic of Moldova has a strong and vocal media, both in relation to the organized criminal groups that still operate in Moldova, combined with the interests of the Kremlin, and to the current pro-European power so that the representatives deliver politically what they promised and do not slide into the area of dark schemes. Because we know well that power corrupts.

The issue that is currently being debated in society is not why the Russian media that ventilate daily disinformation are closed, but the way in which this is done - with little transparency, strategic communication and explanations to the population.

The tactic of the pro-Western power to enter the “silenzio stampa” and to let the institutions of force deal more with this subject raises reasoned suspicions

on the part of citizens, experts and independent media.

Every move must be accompanied by broad explanations and exhaustive reasons from the authorities, but also by consultation on these subjects with external partners who also draw attention to the need for transparent communication of these decisions and the temptation of democratic backsliding in terms of the “greater good” and the effects which such measures to restrict certain media produce. Precisely for these reasons, power faces an extremely difficult test. A test that with more communication – a chapter in which it has never excelled – it can pass successfully, or relegate it by feeding Russian narratives of censorship applied in the name of democracy.

Madalin Necsutu

There is a risk of setting a dangerous precedent, and if the government changes, these tools will work against independent media

The Director of the Center for Journalistic Investigations of Moldova (CIJM), Cornelia Cozonac, spoke openly in an interview given for the FES/APE foreign policy bulletin about the current problems faced by the Moldovan mass media. She explained how important it is for the investigative press to remain strong and vigilant as one of the primordial conditions of a free and democratic society. Cornelia Cozonac also explained why it is important for the press that shares the values of the government to remain upright and to sanction, when necessary, certain backsliding inherent to any act of government. You will learn about all this and much more in the following lines:



■ **How do you see the state of the media in the Republic of Moldova today? Is there more freedom of expression or not, compared to the period of the previous governments?**

■ In general, there is more freedom of expression now, compared to the period of the previous governments led by Vladimir Plahotniuc or Vladimir Voronin. Although I, as a journalist, and our team of the Centre for Journalistic Investigations have always had freedom. For 20 years since the existence of the Centre for Journalistic Investigations, we have been able to do journalistic investigations and publish them. Even though this was back when we didn't have web portals yet. Even so, we could find at least one newspaper willing to publish our investigations. The experience in this regard was very good as several central and regional independent newspapers published our investigations. In other words, we could work continuously, we could do investigative journalism and we could write on any topic.

In the past, however, it was more difficult to access information of public interest and there were more risks. I remember when my colleagues were doing investigations about Plahotniuc's security companies, I was really a little afraid. Those private security companies had checking and listening devices, and could intervene. There were risks for us, but nothing happened to us even then.

Of course, the government now is much more open and you don't have the fear you had before, although strange things still happen. For example, the massive closure of several television stations raises questions. We understand that it is about dubious financing that is related to the fugitive oligarch Ilan Șor and criminal groups, but the

authorities are still taking measures in a non-transparent way. We, the media and society, are not presented with sufficient arguments on the basis of which we can assess whether the authorities have acted in good faith and it is not about „cleaning” the uncomfortable media.

With these measures there is a risk of creating a dangerous precedent, and if the government changes, these tools will act against the independent press. For now, we have more questions than answers about what's going on with the media that was shut down.

Between reasons of national security and censorship

■ **The suspension of operating licenses for televisions sponsored directly or through intermediaries divided opinions in Moldova. One part of society sees this as an act of censorship, while another believes that security reasons must prevail when it comes to shutting down the televisions of fugitive Kremlin-connected oligarchs. How do you see things?**

■ If you were to ask me as a citizen, I can say that yes, these televisions or part of these televisions should have been closed. But as an investigative journalist, I want more details. I want to see very concrete details - whether any links have been established with funding or funding coming from outside or elsewhere.

After the closure of these stations, we, the media community, have been somewhat silent. We made a statement together with other non-governmental organizations, an initiative of the Center for Independent Journalism.

And there have been several other statements since the televisions kept

shutting down, and the authorities did not respond. The media statements were quite reasoned and asked for more details on the reasoning behind the withdrawal or suspension of the licenses. We have seen that some committees have appeared that took decisions overnight and this is also not transparent. Those decisions are not transparent. The tools they operate with are not transparent and this raises questions and they will be like a big stain on the image of the current government which made these decisions.

We understand that there must be security, that there are some big challenges and risks in the context of the war, but also of the dubious funding from outside the country of certain political groups. Moldova does not need very large funding to corrupt even people who are part of the current government. And it is good that the authorities and special services are vigilant, but still, in relation to the mass media there must be much more transparency and very well-reasoned decisions. You cannot simply close or revoke the license of a television station.

The influence of fugitive oligarchs in the media remains strong

■ **How influential do you think the media affiliated with the fugitive oligarchs are today? We refer in particular to Ilan Șor and Vlad Plahotniuc.**

■ I think yes, they are still influential. And these oligarchs will continue to pump money into the media because they need promotion. They aim to overthrow the government, to come to power, but they also have other methods. I see these alternative methods working very well and I think the current authorities should

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learn from this or at least be able to detect them.

Now these political groups work from person to person. I have also seen many people convinced that the candidate proposed by Ilan Shor is exactly the one they should choose. I saw this in U.T.A. Gagauzia, in Orhei. Some unknown candidates are promoted and they are voted. These person-to-person networks work very well, they work intensively and for many citizens they are credible. Common people get information about political and social life from these networks working for such characters.

Inconvenient but necessary investigations

■ You have written a very interesting investigation about the integrity of the Pre-vetting Commission Chairman Herman von Hebel. The things you have written about were not denied by him. However, you have been the target of several attacks, including from journalists. What can you tell us about this episode?

■ We do our work as we have always done it. If there are topics of increased public interest, we give them priority and work on them. This is how we worked when Plahotniuc or Voronin were in power. Now we were surprised to find that there was a very strong and multi-faceted attack. I suspect it was coordinated, because we were attacked on professional grounds. The authorities' statements were such as that was a commissioned investigation, that they know who is behind it, and that it was written for a certain purpose, etc. Even fellow journalist attacked us on professional grounds.

The investigation was routine in the sense that we usually work.

Someone has suggested to us that there are openly controversial materials about Herman von Hebel, the chairman of the Pre-Vetting Commission. I started from some materials from the Dutch press, I took some materials from the New York Times and The Guardian, they are all open sources.

It was an audit report from when Herman von Hebel was president of the Secretariat of the Hague Court of Justice. He carried out a reform there, fired several people, who were later reinstated, and several illegalities were found. All these data were presented in an audit report. There was then more criticism against Hebel, even from the judges of the Hague Court.

We found all this information, translated it and documented it further. I provided cross-reference links to that material, so there was absolutely nothing unverified. I also did a fact-checking, sending a request to the Court of Appeal in the Netherlands, based on the information according to which Herman von Hebel was working for them.

Actually, one problem was that I couldn't find von Hebel's detailed CV, namely since he has been working for the Pre-Vetting Commission. I could not find this document. We had to request it from Parliament. And I obtained it unofficially, as it was not available as public information. From that CV I saw that he is a judge at a Court of Appeal in the Netherlands and have requested confirmation. We have been confirmed that he is still a judge there. In fact, this situation is a conflicting one as he should not hold another public position during the period in which he is active within the Pre-Vetting Commission. Von Hebel later admitted that he had worked there for five days. Even so,

this is a violation of our law and I don't know why this was overlooked.

From the discussion with Oleseia Stamate, former chair of the Legal Commission for Appointments and Immunities, it was clear that the current government is dissatisfied with von Hebel's work. Even Oleseia Stamate said, in the discussion we had, that "we can't wait to get rid of him." This, which is not publicly known, brings to the surface certain problems with the Pre-Vetting Commission and some of its members.

I understand that some members of the commission were appointed by the development partners and our authorities cannot say anything. I understand that our authorities did not have the courage to tell our development partners that this candidate did not meet all the integrity criteria or at least had a problem. But the truth is that no one has checked this aspect. Oleseia Stamate told me that they have received some information about Herman von Hebel, but that it was too late.

The press and involuntary or pecuniary political affiliation

■ How important is it for the investigative media to keep an eye on all the actors in the political spectrum and to keep their professionalism even when it comes to those politicians who work for the same values that the journalists believe in?

■ By its very nature, the press must be in opposition to government. So, it must monitor what all public actors are doing, how public affairs and public money are managed, and if those who hold public positions are people of integrity. That's what the press is for.

Sure, we share the same values promoted by the current government, such as European integration and the fight against corruption, but that doesn't mean we have to relax and be apathetic or politically regimented, that is, write what the government wants and that's it. The media must monitor what the politicians are doing in order not to let them slip into corruption schemes because our society is affected by corruption and we cannot believe that when the government changed, only very honest politicians came in.

However, there will be people who will be tempted to take over the corruption schemes and I am already hearing more and more information about certain corruption schemes being perpetuated. For example, some former heads of public institutions told us that before they came to office, for example, about 60,000 euros were collected monthly from various smaller structures to the top management of the respective institution. The person who held a position in that institution said that now, that amount is probably collected in the same way, only that it goes somewhere lower, because at the top level such a thing is not accepted.

So, some corruption schemes are probably still at work. Thus, the temptation to fall into the net of those who make the corruption schemes, I suspect, is great. In conclusion, I believe that even representatives of the current power can slide towards the respective schemes.

That's why it's important for investigative journalists to be vigilant, document the cases, and find sources, including from within. By the way, the head of the Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office,

Veronica Dragalin, was talking to us at a press club about the fact that some corruption schemes were still operating at the customs offices, with ramifications including at the level of prosecutors, which had been previously established.

Prosecutors admit these schemes exist. If the prosecutors admit it, it means that the schemes are working. And journalists could help unravel those or other schemes that may be hatched. That is why we must continue to work constantly as journalists. And we already have to pay attention to what is happening in the mandate of the current power.

■ What are the major problems facing the investigative media in the Republic of Moldova today? Is there perhaps pressure or self-censorship from the media to report on certain aspects of the government precisely so as not to endanger Moldova's European path in any way? Do you feel that there is such a trend?

■ Yes, I think so. From my monitoring, I can say that there is a group of media outlets that are trying to support the government. I suspect they may also have projects to support the current government. I do not have very concrete information in this regard, but as certain media institutions act, I believe that they try, through their editorial policy, to support this government, without criticizing it or without ensuring a correct informational balance, with critical sources. Precisely so as not to stimulate those who want to change the government and who are pumping money to this end. We know that money is coming from Russia, money is coming from corruption schemes, in order to affect this government.

I have noticed that there is a media group that considers itself independent but is not very critical of the government. Or there are taboo topics towards government. But this is just as dangerous. This used to happen in several post-Soviet countries. For example, in Kazakhstan, when Nursultan Nazarbayev was in power, journalists said they were free as long as they did not criticize the government. So, they could not write anything about the top leadership of the country, even if the local government could be criticized.

Another example is Georgia, where the government gave them generous advertising contracts. According to the monitoring carried out by NGOs, the Georgian-language press carried a lot of propaganda and disinformation on behalf of the Russian Federation.

So, there are methods and tools to corrupt the press or make it loyal - namely money. We mean advertising, projects that are directed towards certain media and in this way the government gains the loyalty of the media. In this way, the press avoids certain topics. For example, and I'm getting back to the investigation of Herman von Hebel. In the first days after publication, no independent media from Moldova took up the subject. It was only when discussions on this issue started in Parliament, when it was discussed on social networks, that certain media started publishing materials related to that investigation. I saw then how part of the media waited to see what would happen and did not address the subject, although it was an issue of increased public interest. But because the investigation somehow affects the justice reform that the government is carrying out, some media hesitated to publish on the issue.

I've always had a lot of respect for investigative journalists who don't bend towards power

The leader of the Coalition for Unity and Welfare (CUB), Igor Munteanu, spoke for this bulletin about his vision on freedom of expression and the level of professionalism of the media today in the Republic of Moldova. We discussed the institutional communication, the political objectives of the Republic of Moldova and fair access to the mass media of all political forces. We invite you to read in the following lines about how the state of the press in the Republic of Moldova is seen from the perspective of a pro-European party leader from the extra-parliamentary opposition:

■ **Mr. Munteanu, how do you see the situation of mass media in the Republic of Moldova today? Is there a greater degree of professionalization of journalists?**

■ Regarding the qualification of journalists, I would not venture to give verdicts. But certainly, the general atmosphere regarding the press and electronic media is not extraordinary. This can be seen even in the latest Freedom House report. There is a lot of pressure on the media.

On the one hand, there is this polarization of the media according to political and geopolitical preferences. On the other hand, there is a polarization after accessing sources of funding for survival.



The first polarization formula involves the presence or association of journalists as persons with a certain degree of professional qualification on culturally assumed subjects. This means that, for example, certain groups of Russian-speaking journalists are certainly more incisive against Europeanization initiatives or the process of joining the European Union. And vice versa, the communities of journalists who speak Romanian and feel somewhat part of a wider Romanian space, to a greater extent, share the objective of taking the Republic of Moldova into a European cultural and political space.

The second form of polarization relates to a trivial and, at the same time, constant issue for our

space in the Republic of Moldova - the press has no money. The media, in order to survive, must play by the rules of an extremely fragmented and fractured economic market. Because the economy is not working, this market for online advertising, or advertising that reaches the final press, is extremely small. From this point of view, the money that is taken for the perpetuation of some television stations is taken from the political space.

■ **Who is targeted by such practices?**

■ This applies both to popular television stations, such as, for example, Jurnal TV, TV8 and so on, and to groups that live on donations from the Russian Federation. Because funding

goes all the way, so that certain states maintain the presence of soft power, that is, the power of persuasion, through the means at their disposal.

Under these conditions, talking about press freedom is somewhat cynical. Because, quite simply, journalists don't really have a choice. Journalists cannot, for example, open some author shows as they would like, or as their vocation or conviction would dictate. Because it has to take into account exactly what the limited partners like.

Slight drop in the world press freedom rankings

■ **The Republic of Moldova ranked 31 out of 180 in the World Press Freedom Index for 2024, three positions lower than last year. What do you think are the causes of this slight decline?**

■ The causes are on the surface. It is about the ban for the 12 television stations that were suspended by a decision of the Commission for Exceptional Situations. There are two issues here.

First of all, I am surprised by the fact that the Republic of Moldova fell by only three steps. Given that you, as a national authority, the government because it is the responsibility of the Government - eliminate a quarter or even more of all the television stations that are rebroadcast or broadcast on your national territory, three steps is certainly not a small drop. It is a heavy blow to freedom of expression. Now, what kind of freedom of expression these television

stations were broadcasting is another matter.

But, statistically speaking or politically speaking, it is a matter of shortening the life of some television stations that had some collectives of journalists behind them, had some economic calculations and had a certain audience. We are talking objectively.

The second issue, sure, has always aroused a lot of dissatisfaction and consternation, namely the fact that the suspension of the licenses of these televisions was handled by an ad hoc commission of "public inquisitor" status and not by the state agency that is by organic law mandated to regulate the audio-visual market.

These things, combined with the expansion of the use of the hybrid war terminology, create in the Republic of Moldova a third extremely serious polarization, from my point of view. Because you cannot achieve a condition of democratic and liberal participation up to a certain level of citizens in conditions where there is a constant fear of aligning yourself with one of two groups: the group fighting a hybrid war and the group conducting the war hybrid.

There is a constant state of suspicion and accusation in the public space about how any kind of message or any kind of campaign folds into a certain political model of conveying a certain geopolitical positioning. Moldova is not in a state of tranquillity and peace. It is indeed under unprecedented attack, and the vehemence

with which the instruments of response are used cannot be considered instruments of peace.

Even the Patriot project [Center for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation -n.r] distorts the existing market.

Shutting down TV channels with Russian propaganda: censorship or sanitary act?

■ **What do you think about the mechanism by which the licenses of several television stations were suspended, as you rightly mentioned? It is about the Investment Agency. Do you see it as a normal move or did the Audiovisual Council have to deal with this matter?**

■ The use of this agency for the verification of strategic investments – I do not know its exact name – is a para-legal invention that has nothing in common with the standards of the rule of law. Because its use can justify any kind of intervention by an authority that is currently in power without ensuring any form of legal protection or the right to defend the entities that are subject to censorship.

Attacks on investigative journalists

■ **What do you think about the recent episode with Cornelia Cozonac, the director of the Center for Journalistic Investigations and the author of a journalistic investigation into the integrity of the chair of the Pre-Vetting Commission, Herman von Hebel? There was**



a lot of backlash against her for doing her job as an investigative journalist.

■ From my point of view, Cornelia Cozonac was subjected to a totally immoral treatment, because it also involved the resources of a party in government and certain journalists who are politically employed for the political group in government in this moment.

Investigative journalism has always played an extremely important role, because the public wanted to get answers other than those offered through official channels. When Mrs. Cozonac identified certain gaps or obscurities in his resume, the realities that Herman von Hebel went through, she had the obligation to report and ask questions to the authorities that hired him and that omitted to communicate certain things during the recruitment process.

When you commit such lapses, you compromise the whole process. The fact that today, for example, a month later, we end up in another scandal, related to another member of the Pre-Vetting Commission, Tatiana Răducanu, who, at the same time, is also part of the Supreme Security Council and of the Independent Anti-corruption Advisory Committee under the Presidency, speaks about the fact that knowingly omitting elements that must raise alarms does not create space for public trust in the institutions that operate from the state budget. They begin to spin in circles, in a vicious circle of complicity, half-said things and distrust of the collective and beneficial purpose that such institutions as

the Pre-Vetting Commission are supposed to have.

I have always had and still have great respect for investigative journalists who do not bow to power, who do not take their ration out of the hands of political power and do not spare any flaws or failures of the public integrity system. Because if this did not happen, we would have to pay tenfold.

We are a state fearful of historical experiences and traumas, but we continue to reproduce them because we often lack the courage for certain categories of people to professionally exercise their obligations. This refers both to the journalist and to the people in the rule of law bodies - prosecutors, judges - not to mention the public service, which at the moment is totally broken under the burden of the political preferences of a single party in Republic of Moldova.

The monopolization of the state in the interests of a political group is an action condemned by the constitutional provisions. Unfortunately, few people realize that this directly affects them and they will be held to account.

Faulty communication

■ **How do you think about the communication with the press of the current government and how transparent and communicated are certain decisions taken by the current government?**

■ From the first year in which it came to government, PAS

paraded. I remember that the main blame that certain ministers or spokesmen of the ruling party took was that we communicated poorly. And help for communication was requested at every political meeting held in the halls of the European Parliament or the European Commission, or from the partner states.

But unfortunately, quantity did not equal quality. At the moment, there is an entire press army that is subject only to the desire of the current ruling party to communicate only about its achievements, without questioning that certain achievements could have been done faster, more efficiently, with less resources, and more focused on citizens' priorities. The discrepancies between the citizens' expectations and the economic, education or health policies for example, are staggeringly large.

At this point, I believe that the current government needs not so much more communication, but more honest communication, in order to maintain or build the conditions of trust that are vitally necessary for this state not to collapse.

Things are quite serious, because there is a big bubble of PAS with this army of loyal people and a population that is also boiling in Chisinau and other regions, and the alerts about this boiling process have been detected throughout the last elections, starting with the May 2023 governor elections in the Gagauz Autonomous Region. There is another problem - that people are easily manipulated or easily bought, but the discrepancy

between their voting options or their expectations in relation to a national agenda and what is delivered is astonishingly large.

Political games in the public media

■ **As the leader of an extra-parliamentary opposition party, how often are you invited on public television and radio? Do you think that the representatives of the opposition parties in the Republic of Moldova have sufficient access to the public media?**

■ You must be joking. In the last six months I think I've only been on a show once and that was for ten minutes. When it comes to top shows like *Buna Seara* or other shows that run between an hour and an hour and a half, I didn't have the luxury of being invited to. Although I notice with a certain degree of envy the repetition or perpetuation of the same faces that undoubtedly belong to the party in government.

It is unfortunately a vicious practice for certain parties to monopolize their right to make lists of recommended or recommendable people and others who should not be displayed in public space.

This distorts the democratic processes and creates a great discrepancy between the realities conveyed to citizens and, fundamentally, the standards of a pluralistic, democratic state, from which should start all other trends, including accession and the process of European integration

which is only an effect of democratic pluralism in the Republic of Moldova.

It is an effect of the rule of law and our right to express a European identity. When, for example, you do nothing but monopolize the public space, the instruments of power, believing that you are ultimately right, you can very easily find yourself thrown into the dustbin of history, because the citizens' options are much more dynamic, they are much more demanding and expect a more humane approach from the government.

The press, the fourth power in the state?

■ **What are the prerogatives that the press in the Republic of Moldova should enjoy in order to become even informally that fourth power in the state, which would help the mechanism of checks and balances between the powers of the states?**

■ In order to comply with the ethical standards, the press from Moldova must ask all the people or those whom they report on or promote in public space, the truth that the citizens expect and more specifically, questions with enough sharpness for people in administrative, political or any other kind of positions to report, be accountable to the citizen for what they do and what they don't do. However, we see that in relation to people from the extra-parliamentary opposition, the press launches hurricanes of accusations, leaving on the power's bench people who should definitely answer for what they did or committed.

There are a lot of uncertainties and questions to be asked about the way in which public money is managed, in which the economy or the relevant sectors related to public life are managed. You wonder, in fact, what schools these journalists went through, who benefits from such a distortion of functions, of prerogatives, as you mentioned. What is the general use of a press that adulates people in certain positions of power when the population is going through unprecedented economic shocks?

Just look at the national statistics data to see how much of the population remains in the extreme poverty zone, then the massive population have left the country in recent years. The latter have not been limited to the number of people who usually leave the country, but actually increased.

Look also at the total lack of credibility of economic initiatives, because when in the neighbouring Ukraine 5,400 investment projects entered in the last two years, despite the war, not a single foreign company entered the Republic of Moldova in the last three years of the current government.

This speaks of the incompetence of some people who, with great arrogance, claim to be ministers, but only manage the interests of their own salary, or perhaps manage the interests of certain groups, who use the current government or certain ministries, so as not to generalize, in order to perpetuate poverty and lack of professionalism.

■ **Thank you!**

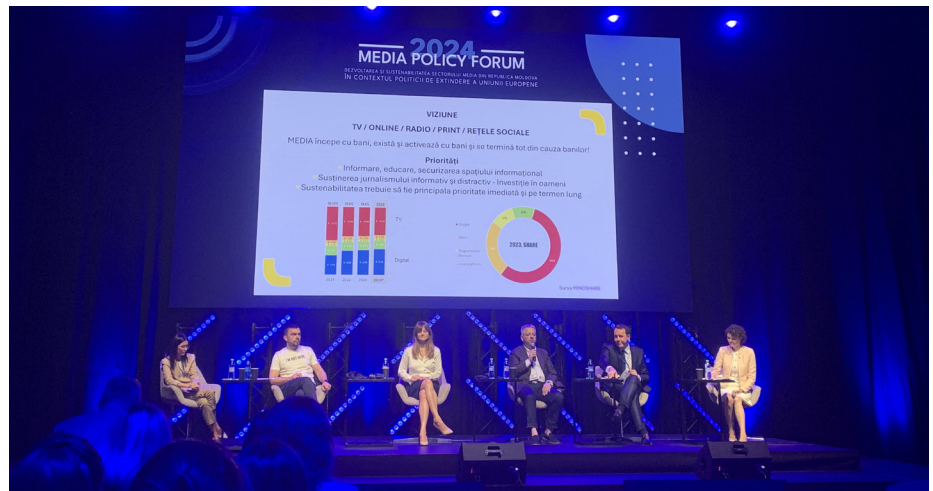
How can the Republic of Moldova navigate through the fight against disinformation without resorting to censorship?

More than 100 journalists, media experts, communicators, advertising specialists and officials met on 23 May at the Media Forum Policy 2024 to discuss in a broader format the most pressing issues facing the Moldovan mass media today – from the harmonization of national legislation with that of the European Union, to disinformation, freedom of expression and censorship, the economic development of the mass media to the advertising sector and the regulation of online media. The guests discussed in detail and analysed how the Republic of Moldova can have a free, independent and sustainable mass media.

Also, the participants debated how the press can develop economically in extremely unfavourable conditions caused by the war waged by Russia in Ukraine, but also by the hybrid war with all its elements that Russia is waging in the Republic of Moldova.

“The media play an essential role in any democratic society. Citizens and civil society need access to fact-based information and multiple points of view to make informed decisions about political issues and vis-à-vis their elected representatives,” said the American ambassador in Chisinau, Kent Logsdon.

He said that access to independent media allows voters to hold the government accountable and increases resistance to misinformation. “Creating the conditions for a prosperous media sector is a complex and equally important task. And the broadcasting



of media productions through the non-traditional platform represents new opportunities, but also challenges, especially for the media that are susceptible to foreign informational manipulation”, added the American official.

The diplomat stated that it is very important to continue efforts to have a new independent media sector that is diverse and strong.

The EU draws attention to the fine line between countering propaganda and censorship

On the other hand, the EU ambassador in Chisinau, Janis Mazeiks, stated that Moldova was praised recently, in Brussels, within the EU-Republic of Moldova Association Council, for the reforms undertaken so far, although there is still much to be done with a view to EU integration. “The media and freedom were also discussed, and let me once again recognize the essential

role of a free, independent and energetic media that contributes to the democratic and economic development of Moldova,” he said.

The European official added that, in recent years, the Moldovan media landscape has suffered the consequences of the Russian army’s war in Ukraine and Russia’s hybrid attacks against the Republic of Moldova.

“The presence of the oligarchs’ influence has created a media full of prejudices and easily manipulated by external influences. The suspension of licenses for several TV channels, including those linked to fugitive oligarchs, reflects ongoing efforts to address these issues and combat divisiveness. Although we understand that the suspension of licenses is a necessary step in this fight against hate speech, it is essential that these actions are carried out through transparent and fair rules to maintain public trust”, the EU official pointed out.

The European diplomat stated that in the Republic of Moldova there is also a significant economic challenge that leads to difficulties in managing operations and retaining qualified personnel in this sector. "Many media organizations have requested support from us and other partners to deal with these difficulties. While the EU is committed to supporting free and independent media in Moldova, the fact that it depends on external funding shows the critical need to have a sustainable economic model," he added.

Mazeiks welcomed the Government's newest initiative, after Parliament approved in April the creation of a media subsidy fund. In the opinion of the EU official, this is a beneficial initiative for the consolidation of media pluralism. He also stated that it is very important for the Public Television and the Broadcasting Council to maintain their independence and autonomy.

"While regulation is crucial to ensure the correct distribution of information, we must be mindful of the principles of other regulations. It's a delicate balance we must maintain to protect the integrity of our media space. Despite these challenges, there are important components and steps already underway," he said.

Janis Mazeiks also added that, in October, the citizens of the Republic of Moldova will be called to a referendum to choose whether they want a future in the EU, and the role of the media is very relevant in this context. "Right now, mass media can play an essential role in helping citizens make informed and objective decisions. Through collaborative efforts, we can strive to cultivate a robust independent media that contributes to the development of well-informed and engaged citizens," the diplomat concluded.

Debate and criticism, absolutely necessary elements in the media space

For her part, the British ambassador in Chisinau, Fern Horine, said that the media is an integral part, an integral ingredient for democracy, global security and prosperity, and that citizens need credible and independent sources to provide them with correct information and quality content. "A robust regulatory framework not only protects against anti-competitive practices, but also fosters a vibrant media ecosystem that promotes diversity of voices and ideas. And this free exchange of different opinions and information allows communities to identify issues as well as critical debates. A free media informs, investigates and identifies issues and enables this critical debate," she said.

The British diplomat also said there is a need to maintain the convergence of traditional and new media platforms, ensuring that internet freedom is essential to uphold democratic values and protect fundamental rights.

"The regulation of the online space will undoubtedly shape the digital future of the Moldovan media and, indeed, of the global media. And the role of social media platforms, YouTube, Telegram channels, has grown substantially and with it the danger of disinformation. And there is a constant flow through multiple channels of disinformation in Moldova. So today, more than ever, we need to look at how we can counter misinformation that is harmful," she pointed out.

In her view, one of the best antidotes to disinformation is a robust, free, vibrant and diverse media landscape. "But that brings up some important questions that I think you can consider today. How do we tackle misinformation and hate speech? And how can we protect those who exercise freedom of expression, be it offline or online?" she added.

Censorship or national security reasons?

However, there is a debate as to why the suspension earlier this year of the broadcasting licenses of 12 TV stations affiliated to fugitive oligarchs Ilan Șor and Vlad Plahotniuc is in the hands of the Committee for Strategic Investments and not of the Audiovisual Council (CA), the national regulator that deals with such issues.

The President of the Audiovisual Council declared, on May 24, during the Media Policy Forum 2024, that her institution acted on the basis of Article 13 of the Audiovisual Code, which stipulates the conditions for ensuring correct information. "If we didn't have article 13 of the Broadcasting Code, I don't know how we would have been able to fight Russian propaganda in the conditions of the war in Ukraine. In the past, the programs of the local televisions abounded with rebroadcast Russian programs and looked more like a Russian information space than a Moldovan one," explained Liliana Vițu.

In recent years, the face of the media landscape in Moldova has changed by obliging local television stations to produce eight hours of local content in Romanian every day, of which 50 percent of the works broadcast by television and radio stations must come from EU countries. This led to the reduction of the Russian language content that was broadcast free of charge from the major Russian television stations in Moldova. Moscow has always used this soft power tool to attract viewers in an informational space dominated by Russian entertainment shows, news bulletins and films in which Russian propaganda narratives were directly or subliminally inserted.

The expert and director of the

Electronic Press Association, Ion Bunduchi, declared, on May 24, during the Media Policy Forum 2024, that freedom of expression is not unlimited in the case of the suspension of the licenses of the 12 television stations affiliated to the oligarchs in connection with Moldova. "If freedom of expression comes to abuse democracy, then how do we protect democracy? Self-regulation in the media market can only happen in a more mature society, not like that of Moldova, for now," Bunduchi said.

The Moldovan authorities acted on the media that promoted the interests of the Kremlin through pro-Russian parties, which campaign for the abandonment of the European path of Moldova, which is preparing in June to officially begin the technical opening of the negotiation chapters with the EU.

Russian propaganda is moving online

Against this background, the president of the Audio-visual Council, Liliana Vițu, drew attention during the Media Policy Forum 2024 to the fact that the problem of Russian propaganda, as part of the hybrid war that Russia is waging against Moldova, is far from being solved. "Propaganda messages and disinformation have moved from the television area to the online one, where a very intense political micro-targeting is done," Vițu also specified.

The media consultant from the Comsol company, Deirdre Kevin, stated on the occasion of the Media Policy Forum 2024, organized by Freedom House, that Moldova largely respects the transposition of European legislation into its own national legislation in the media field. "From what I've seen of the law, and I've seen several versions, I'd say in terms of the audiovisual media services directive, there's probably 80 percent," she said.

However, she stressed that "there needs to be a little more clarity about what is prohibited, what is illegal, what is harmful content." "There has to be a more careful balance, say, with self-confidence. There needs to be more self-regulation because the concept of exact content is very problematic," added Deirdre Kevin.

At the same time, the Moldovan media is also facing serious financial problems, especially due to the contraction of the advertising market due to the war in Ukraine.

Government promises funding for independent media

In order to meet these problems, Prime Minister Dorin Recean spoke at Media Forum Policy 2024 about the approach of a subsidy formula for Moldovan media.

"The Government's goal is to develop media pluralism, to support cultural, educational and media literacy projects, to strengthen the editorial and economic independence of the mass media," said Recean.

The Parliament approved last month, in the final reading, the Law on the Subsidy Fund in the field of mass media, and the first call in the competition for financing media projects will be announced in the fall of this year.

"We need credible and strong media institutions that inform correctly and objectively, and honest and upright journalists who bring the truth to our homes. It is essential to combat Russian disinformation and propaganda, which undermines peace and stability in our country. A free, independent and responsible press is crucial for our country project - Building a European Moldova at home", said Prime Minister Dorin Recean.

However, media expert Deirdre Kevin says this process needs to be transparent and fair. She concluded that any media wishing to access such a fund provided by the Government should "adhere to journalistic ethics and register with the Press Council and not have breached many things with the regulator".

Madalin Necsutu

The opinions expressed in the newsletter are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) or of the Foreign Policy Association (APE).