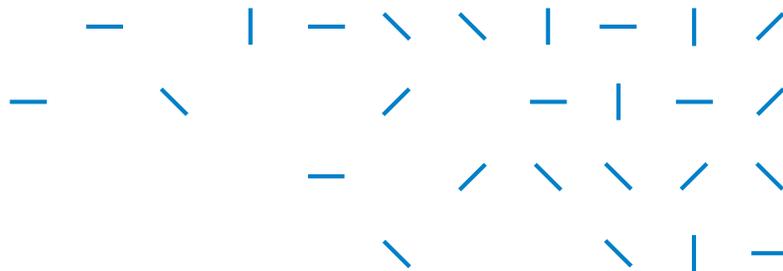




Baltic Centre for  
Media Excellence



# Assessment of Public Media Performance in the Presidential Election in Moldova November 2020

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December 2020



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# 1. Objective

The Republic of Moldova held a presidential election on November 1, 2020, followed by a runoff on November 15. The Baltic Centre for Media Excellence (BCME) produced a rapid **assessment of the performance of the public broadcaster in the coverage of the election campaign, voting and reporting of results, with a particular emphasis on its compliance with its own editorial, as well as international, standards and responsibility to provide an impartial public service.** The following report is a product of desk research, the author's expertise and analysis, and eight interviews (please see attached list in the Annex); three political analysts, four media experts and representatives of watchdog organisations and one with the representative of the Audiovisual Council – the regulatory body. Despite repeated invitations, the public broadcaster representatives did not grant the study author an interview, despite initial agreement to do so.

## 2.1. Political Context

**The political turmoil, which began after the parliamentary elections in February 2019, continued in 2020. The political landscape was dominated by attempts by the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM) and President Igor Dodon to increase their influence and control of both Parliament and the Government, as well as media and the judiciary. In 2020, after months of political upheaval and periodic shared rule, Dodon and PSRM took over power from former Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM) leader, Vladimir Plahotniuc who fully controlled political life in the country until June 2019. However, the November presidential election outcome is expected to only slightly change the difficult situation the Republic of Moldova (hereafter Moldova) found itself in.**

The presidential election took place on 1 November 2020. The Central Electoral Commission (CEC) had registered eight candidates, seven of whom were nominated by political parties. The incumbent president, pro-Russian Igor Dodon, ran independently, but was openly backed by the PSRM. The

turnout in the first round was 42,76%, above the minimum required threshold of one third of registered voters. As no candidate won more than 50% of the votes cast, a second round was held on 15 November.<sup>1</sup> In the first round, CEC reports showed that the incumbent, president Dodon – seen as having the highest chances of victory – won 32.6% of the vote, coming in second. Dodon's main rival, the pro-EU candidate Maia Sandu, leader of center-right Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) came in first, at 36.1%.<sup>2</sup> Renato Usatii, the controversial politician and leader of Our Party (Partidul Nostru), finished third with almost 17 %.<sup>3</sup>

The second round was held on 15 November. With a turnout of 52.78% – a 10% increase compared to the first round – the pro-EU opposition candidate Sandu won the runoff with 57.75% of the vote.<sup>4</sup> Dodon, who had been endorsed by the Kremlin and predicted as the likely winner, got only 42.25%. Sandu became the first woman to be elected Moldovan president<sup>5</sup>, winning 52.6% of the domestic vote and 93% of expatriate votes.

The preliminary conclusions of the monitoring organisations – among them the ENEMO (The European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations) International Election Observation Mission to Moldova<sup>6</sup>; and the OSCE/ODIHR-Election Observation Mission – stated that the election campaign for the presidential elections was organised professionally and mostly carried out according to the electoral legal framework.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the domestic Civic Coalition for Free and Fair Elections considered the presidential elections to be only partially correct and partially free. All the candidates were able to campaign despite restrictions imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the voters were provided with a wide range of choices. However, there were accusations of voters being influenced, primarily at polling stations set up for those with residency in the Transnistrian region. But, even though some procedural irregularities were observed, they did not affect the legitimacy of the process overall.

There were three major factors that made Dodon lose the election to Sandu. The **first** one was the Moldovan diaspora, with an overwhelming turnout rate, pushing back on attacks by Dodon who called it a 'parallel electorate'. The diaspora's

1 Central Electoral Commission, *Alegeri prezidențiale 2020 în Republica Moldova [2020 Presidential elections in Moldova]*, 2 November 2020, available at <https://pv.cec.md/cec-template-presidential-results.html>.

2 Politico.eu, *Moldovan presidential election goes to second round*, 2 November 2020, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/moldova-presidential-election-to-second-round/>.

3 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Ce condiții pune Renato Usatii pentru a o susține pe Maia Sandu [What conditions puts Renato Usatii in order to support Maia Sandu]*, 3 November 2020, available at <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/ce-condi%C8%9Bii-pune-renato-usat%C3%AEi-pentru-a-o-sus%C8%9Bine-pe-maia-sandu/30928287.html>.

4 BBC, *Moldova election: Pro-EU candidate Maia Sandu wins presidency*, 16 November 2020, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54942847>.

5 DW, *Moldova election: Pro-EU Maia Sandu wins presidency*, 16 November 2020, available at <https://www.dw.com/en/moldova-election-pro-eu-maia-sandu-wins-presidency/a-55611249>.

6 Info Prim Press Agency, *ENEMO: Election was conducted mostly in line with electoral legal framework of Moldova*, 3 November 2020, available at [https://www.ipn.md/en/enemo-election-was-conducted-mostly-in-line-with-electoral-legal-framework-of-mo-8008\\_1077350.html](https://www.ipn.md/en/enemo-election-was-conducted-mostly-in-line-with-electoral-legal-framework-of-mo-8008_1077350.html).

7 OSCE/ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission, *Republic of Moldova – Presidential Election*, 1 November 2020, available at [https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/1/469035\\_0.pdf](https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/1/469035_0.pdf).

votes practically tipped the scales for Sandu's victory in both rounds.<sup>8</sup> Thus, over 150 thousand voters from the diaspora – approximately 12% of the total turnout – voted in the first round; and over 260 thousand – around 16% of the total turnout – voted in the second – exceeding a record registered previously in the second round of presidential elections in 2016, when around 140 thousand voters from abroad participated.<sup>9</sup> In both rounds, around 90% of the diaspora votes went to Sandu.

Corruption allegations that surrounded Dodon were the **second** factor. A video from June 2019 showing a meeting between Dodon and former PDM leader Plahotniuc, in which the latter hands over to the former a plastic bag allegedly containing money, became a viral meme and the source of multiple jokes. 'Kuliok' (a plastic bag) became the word of the year in Moldova and turned into a nickname for Dodon, damaging his political image and chances of winning.<sup>10</sup>

**Finally**, Sandu gained political experience since the 2016 presidential election campaign. She expanded her electoral base, strengthening Russian language messaging and communication materials, targeting ethnic minorities and the Russified segments of society. She accused her opponent of economic shortcomings, failures of governance, political corruption and mishandling of the pandemic.<sup>11</sup> Dodon, on the other hand, campaigned on a very negative and divisive agenda<sup>12</sup>, attacking his rival with defamatory techniques and speculating about Sandu's private life, her tolerance of the LGBT community or a hidden agenda of reunification with Romania. Moreover, Dodon's messages were dominated by harsh attacks against civil society, independent media and the diaspora.

The reports of media watchdog organisations mentioned that many online platforms (e.g. *Actualitati.md*, *Aif.md*, *Kp.md*, *Vedosti.md*, *Noi.md*) and TV stations (e.g. *Primul în Moldova*, *NTV Moldova*, *Accent TV*) lacked balance in reporting on the campaign and the candidates, massively favouring Dodon, while portraying Sandu in a negative light.<sup>13</sup> Also, Moldovan authorities were blamed for the insufficient number of polling stations opened abroad. The CEC was

criticised for its passive role in resolving appeals, especially those related to the financing of the election campaigns of some candidates and their use of state administrative resources.<sup>14</sup> The Audiovisual Council was accused of slow reaction to ethical violations by some media institutions.<sup>15</sup>

The November presidential elections represented a turning point for Moldova. Maia Sandu's victory could bring a reset in Moldova's domestic politics and change the external path of the country, towards the West, improving relations with Romania, Ukraine and the EU. Sandu's three key priorities – bringing the country out of international isolation; justice reform and clear actions to fight corruption; and overcoming the coronavirus crisis – promise to have an impact both domestically and externally. Her victory could trigger snap parliamentary elections and a reshaping of the political field.

## 2.2. Public Media in Moldova

Independent and transparent public service media constitutes an essential element of a democratic society. France Televisions, the British BBC or German ARD are just a few examples. The maturity of the political class is an essential condition for the functioning of independent public media. This is especially true when management appointments are determined, either directly or indirectly, by political forces, as is the case in Moldova. Public media in Moldova has been in continuous transition and redesign since 1994.<sup>16</sup>

The first mentions of public media in Moldova date to 1940-1941 when radio services were part of the Committee for Radio and Broadcasting under the Soviet of People's Commissars of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR). The first television programme was broadcast in 1958. Between 1958 and 1989 television and radio state services operated under various Committees of the MSSR, and in 1990 it became the National Radio and Television Media Institution. In August 2004, the company 'Teleradio-Moldova' obtained the status of a 'public media institution' and was renamed the Public Broadcasting Institution

8 Vitalie Calugareanu, *Candidata pro-europeană Maia Sandu a câștigat turul întâi al alegerilor prezidențiale* [Pro-European candidate Maia Sandu won the first round of the presidential election], 2 November 2020, available at <https://www.dw.com/ro/candidata-pro-european%C4%83-maia-sandu-a-c%C3%A2%C8%99tigat-turul-%C3%A2i-al-alegerilor-preziden%C8%99Bia-le/a-55473976>.

9 Madalin Necsutu, *Moldovan President Slams Diaspora for Voting for Rival*, 3 November 2020, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/11/03/moldovan-president-slams-diaspora-for-voting-for-rival/>.

10 Stanislav Secieru, *Moldova Has a New President. What Next?*, 19 November 2020, available at <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/83269>.

11 Denis Cenusă, *What Will Change for Moldova?*, 17 November 2020, available at <https://visegradinsight.eu/what-will-change-for-moldova/>.

12 Interview with Madalin Necsutu, journalist and political analyst, 29 November 2020.

13 Independent Journalism Centre from Moldova, *Raport CJI: Patru posturi de televiziune au continuat să facă partizanat în favoarea unor candidați* [IJC report: Four television stations continued to support some candidates], 3 November 2020, available at <http://media-azi.md/ro/stiri/raport-cji-patru-posturi-de-televiziune-au-continuat-s%C4%83-fac%C4%83-partizanat-%C3%AEn-favoarea-unor>.

14 Interview with Angela Grămadă, political analyst and president of Experts for Security and Global Affairs Think-tank, 29 November 2020.

15 Interview with Alexandru Cozer, journalist and political analyst, 28 November 2020.

16 Victor Goțișan and Tatiana Puiu, *The activity of the Supervisory Board of Public Service Broadcaster 'Teleradio-Moldova': between reforms and 'stability'*, Chisinau 2015, available in Romanian at <http://media-azi.md/ro/publicatii/activitatea-consiliului-de-observatori-al-ipna-teleradio-moldova-%C3%AEn-reforme-%C8%99i>.

'Teleradio-Moldova' (hereafter TRM). Currently, according to the legislation there is a national public media service provider – Company 'Teleradio-Moldova' (TRM) – and a regional public media service provider – Company 'Gagauziya Radio Televizionu'.<sup>17</sup> The regional public media service provider Company 'Gagauziya Radio Televizionu' is funded by the People's Assembly of Gagauzia, however it works under the provisions of the Code of Audiovisual Media Services.<sup>18</sup>

By law, the term 'public media' instead of 'state media', has been applied since 2002. The transition to public media began in 1994, at the recommendation of the Council of Europe for Moldova to transform its state television (TV Moldova 1) and radio (Radio Moldova) into public institutions. In 1995, Parliament passed the first Audiovisual Law, which in article 7(1) stipulated that the 'State Company 'Teleradio-Moldova' is a public audiovisual institution and cannot be privatised'. Subsequent versions of the Audiovisual Law adopted in 2002, 2006 and 2018 reconfirmed the fact that TRM is a public media institution. The adoption on 26 July 2002 of the Law no. 1320-XV on a national public media institution cemented in law the status of TRM as 'public media institution'. In reality, however, the situation has not changed sufficiently for TRM to become a true public institution serving the public interest. With small exceptions – between 2010 and 2014 – public television and radio served the interests of the people and political parties in power, rather those of the public. Public interests continued to be confused with state interests, involuntarily or intentionally.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, in almost 30 years of independence TRM has not made a full transition to public media. Formally, both TV Moldova 1 and Radio Moldova have broadcast schedules prepared according to the requirements of the law and acts regulating the activity of public media. However, whether it be editorially or ethically, neither of these two media institutions – TV Moldova 1 in particular – meet the professional standards of impartiality expected of public media. Monitoring reports of media NGOs – including those covering the election campaigns and pre-election

periods – confirm this, indicating that public media favour some candidates (usually representatives of the government) and disadvantage others (usually representatives of the political opposition).<sup>20</sup>

Although, TRM terms of reference state expressly that the mission of public media is to become a best practice media institution, editorial policy continues to lack adherence to principles of impartiality and pluralism; fails to give priority to public interest; and produces poor quality media content.<sup>21</sup> The quality of content broadcast by TV Moldova 1 and Radio Moldova is much lower than that of private television and radio. Audience data reflect this; neither of the two public media institutions – TV Moldova 1 and Radio Moldova – is in the top five most popular broadcasters in the country.<sup>22</sup> Also, the monitoring reports show that private television and radio often promote public messages much better, more accurately, faster and more attractively than the public media. This becomes particularly apparent during events of high public interest, such as the political events in June 2019<sup>23</sup>, the Covid-19 pandemic, and presidential elections in November 2020.<sup>24</sup>

A major challenge is the public media's financial dependence on the state budget – a source of around 90% of TRM's budget. This leads to TRM shaping its editorial policy based on the political parties holding power, which through Parliament control, the amount allocated annually for public media.<sup>25</sup> This arrangement also leads to complacency by TRM management, which does not explore other funding options. As a result, TRM places little emphasis on diversifying its funding and has not developed a strong marketing department, but rather '*...is waiting for the supplier of commercial income to come to TRM independently, instead of looking for it*'. The legislation has always allowed for TRM to diversify its funding sources, but the institution has neither the capacity nor the incentive to do that, for, as the media expert Ion Bunduchi explains, '*those from TRM, anyway have a secured budget and salaries from the state budget, regardless of (non)diversification of funding sources*'.<sup>26</sup>

17 Gagauzia, is an autonomous region of Moldova. Its autonomy is ethnically motivated by the predominance of the Gagauz people, who are primarily Orthodox Turkic-speaking people.

18 Code of Audiovisual media services of the Republic of Moldova, adopted on 08.11.2018, available in Romanian at <http://www.audiovizual.md/files/Codul%20serviciilor%20media%20audiovizuale.pdf>.

19 Interview with Alexandru Cozer, journalist and political analyst, 28 November 2020.

20 Independent Journalism Center from Moldova, *Media monitoring during the electoral period and electoral campaign for the presidential elections of November 1-15, 2020*, available in English at <http://media-azi.md/en/media-monitoring-during-electoral-period-and-electoral-campaign-presidential-elections-november-15>; Independent Journalism Center from Moldova, *Monitoring Report MOLDOVA 1 Period: March 9 – 15, 2020*, available in English at <http://media-azi.md/en/monitoring-report-moldova-1-period-march-9-%E2%80%93-15-2020>.

21 Interview with Viorica Zaharia, media expert and president of Council of Press from Moldova, 27 November 2020.

22 The TV and Radio audiences published by AGB Nielsen Moldova for May-June 2020 may be accessed in Russian at <https://agb.md/obzory-televizionnoj-auditorii/>.

23 For example, in June 2019, Moldova was on the brink of coup and in the centre of the capital Chisinau riot police, accompanied by groups of pro-PDM protesters, blockaded government buildings. However, the public media broadcasters' TV Moldova1 and Radio Moldova broadcasted the whole day classical and folk concerts and, only close to evening started to reflect the political events which happened in Parliament and in from of the Government building.

24 Interview with Ion Bunduchi, media expert and director of Association of Electronic Press (APEL), 22 November 2020.

25 Interview with Anastasia Nani, deputy director of Independent Journalism Center from Moldova, 28 November 2020.

26 Interview with Ion Bunduchi, media expert and director of Association of Electronic Press (APEL), 22 November 2020.

Another challenge is the indirect political interference in the appointments of TRM management.<sup>27</sup> The new Audiovisual Law established new selection and/or appointment procedures, but the outcome remains the same. Political forces continue to control the selection of TRM management (including of directors of television and radio) and of the members of the TRM Supervisory Council.<sup>28</sup> Members of the Council are elected by the Audiovisual Council (Consiliul Audiovizualului, hereafter CA), a regulator which is also politically influenced.<sup>29</sup>

According to the provisions of the Code of Audiovisual Media Services, TRM is led by a general director, appointed by the TRM Supervisory Council through public competition for a single seven-year term. The general director appoints the deputy directors in charge of TV Moldova 1 and Radio Moldova. The Supervisory Council is the governing body of TRM, composed of nine members, public figures with professional qualifications in various fields. The members of the TRM Supervisory Council are selected, on a competitive basis by the CA, the regulator of the entire audiovisual media sector.

TRM funding comes from state budget subsidies and other sources. State budget subsidies are established annually, according to the law on the state budget, reflecting the previous year's levels, adjusted for inflation. Its own revenues may stem from commercial audiovisual broadcasts during events of major importance, from the selling of audiovisual programmes, from copyright from co-productions, and donations and sponsorship. According to media expert, Viorica Zaharia, a mistake made in the drafting of the new Code of Audiovisual Media Services in 2018 was '*...that TRM was deprived of the right to generate money by broadcasting commercial advertising. This can be a revenue stream which once developed could minimise the political influence*'.<sup>30</sup>

Over the last ten years, TRM has benefitted from the support, advice and assistance of many foreign donors. In 2010–2015, the main donors providing support to TRM were the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs/Slovak Aid, The Black Sea Trust, Deutsche Welle, the Council of Europe (CoE), Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

(OSCE), U.S. Embassy in Moldova, European Broadcasting Union (EBU), and indirectly the Chinese government through assistance to the Moldovan government, and others. The support provided during this period focused mainly on modernisation of technical equipment, creation of the multimedia department and digitalisation of TV Moldova 1 and Radio Moldova studios.<sup>31</sup> In the years 2016–2020, the CoE, the EU, the U.S. Embassy in Moldova, and the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Chisinau, were among the most important donors. The support in this period further focused on the modernisation and digitalisation of TV Moldova 1 and Radio Moldova, as well as on empowering and strengthening professional capacities of public media journalists. For example, in 2017–2019, the CoE and EU, provided assistance in opening of a Training Centre of TRM for its Documentary Films Department, and for the creation and launching of a new website.<sup>32</sup> Also, in 2018 and 2019, TRM received support from the U.S. Embassy in Moldova via the project 'Creative community consolidation of next generation of Moldovan journalists and media professionals', which aimed to empower journalists and provide professional training for them. The U.S. Embassy provided support in acquiring technical equipment and contributed to the digitalisation and technological upgrade of some TV and radio studios. In addition, in 2018–2019, the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Chisinau through Promo-LEX – a local partner organisation, providing support and advice to TV Moldova 1 in organizing electoral debate programs since 2016 – contributed to the construction of a special studio for electoral debates and the modernisation of the main broadcasting studio of Radio Moldova.

The law requires every media outlet to submit to the CA a declaration of its editorial policy for each election campaign. Based on this, on 15 September 2020, TRM submitted to the CA a declaration in which it specified its editorial guidelines for the coverage of the November presidential election campaign. In this declaration, TRM committed itself to reflect the campaign based on national and international legislation, observing the principles of impartiality and independence, fairness and respect for the human dignity and privacy of every candidate in the campaign.<sup>33</sup>

27 Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2020: Moldova*, April 2020, available in English at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/nations-transit/2020>.

28 Interview with Alexandru Cozer, journalist and political analyst, 28 November 2020.

29 Victor Gotișan, *Consiliul Audiovizualului, versiunea 2020: (încă) un an pandemic de (in)activitate?* [Audiovisual Council, version 2020: (another) pandemic year of (in) activity?], 13 November 2020, available in Romanian at [http://media-azi.md/ro/stiri/consiliul-audiovizualului-versiunea-2020-%C3%AEnc%C4%83-un-pandemic-de-inactivitate?fbclid=IwAR1\\_UYlu6v4cX6lhQ5cH\\_-mPi-u5rY42T7-ojTB3eiX1dzbEBARHbiY\\_uKM](http://media-azi.md/ro/stiri/consiliul-audiovizualului-versiunea-2020-%C3%AEnc%C4%83-un-pandemic-de-inactivitate?fbclid=IwAR1_UYlu6v4cX6lhQ5cH_-mPi-u5rY42T7-ojTB3eiX1dzbEBARHbiY_uKM).

30 Interview with Viorica Zaharia, media expert and president of Council of Press from Moldova, 27 November 2020.

31 Interview with Liliana Vitu, former head of News Department, TV Moldova 1, 2010–2012, 1 December 2020.

32 Council of Europe, Official Opening of a Training Centre of the Broadcasting Company Teleradio-Moldova, 14 June 2020, available in English at [https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/previous-news-and-activities/-/asset\\_publisher/VYTMd0WbF8e/content/official-opening-of-the-training-centre-of-the-broadcasting-company-teleradio-moldova?inheritRedirect=false](https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/previous-news-and-activities/-/asset_publisher/VYTMd0WbF8e/content/official-opening-of-the-training-centre-of-the-broadcasting-company-teleradio-moldova?inheritRedirect=false).

33 Audiovisual Council, *Declarația IP Compania „Teleradio-Moldova” privind politica editorială pentru campania electorală în alegerile din 01 noiembrie 2020 a Președintelui Republicii Moldova* [‘Teleradio-Moldova’ Company statement on the editorial policy for the election campaign for presidential elections from November 1, 2020], 15 September 2020, available in Romanian at [http://www.audiovizual.md/files/Moldova%201\\_0.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2kdOZJABUDulO73ohF86nibYkLRiWd0lpbQ3nmhH5oQpWGTWTI\\_3SxnXQ](http://www.audiovizual.md/files/Moldova%201_0.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2kdOZJABUDulO73ohF86nibYkLRiWd0lpbQ3nmhH5oQpWGTWTI_3SxnXQ).

## 2.3. Assessment of Public Media Performance

Public media performance during election campaigns has raised questions every time since 1994. According to monitoring organisations, and national and international missions observing the elections, Radio Moldova, and to a greater extent TV Moldova 1, tended to favour parties and candidates in power and disadvantage those in opposition. The November 2020 presidential election campaign was no exception. The CA, in its own reports, rated the performance of the two channels as good, accurate and unbiased. But watchdog organisations which prepared their own monitoring reports pointed out that public media once again proved to be slightly biased, siding<sup>34</sup> with Dodon in the news programs and especially in the debates in the second round of the election campaign.

**A. Pre-election period (January – September 2020).** In order to analyse and assess how unbiased a media outlet is, it is important to monitor its activity and editorial performance in the pre-election period as well. The monitoring reports prepared by the Independent Journalism Center in Moldova (IJC) in March 2020 and September 2020, found that public television Moldova 1 favoured the Moldovan authorities (government, president, and parliament) and the parties in power (PSRM in particular). So, among most often mentioned persons – directly or indirectly – in TV Moldova news were: first ranked – president Dodon, followed by Prime Minister Ion Chicu, Minister of Health Viorica Dumbrăveanu and Ion Ceban, mayor of Chisinau (former member of PSRM and active Dodon supporter in the presidential election campaign).<sup>35</sup> Most of the time items about PSRM were placed near the top of newscasts. Also, public television presented PSRM initiatives only in a favourable light. Conversely, TV Moldova 1 appeared to downplay or disadvantage opposition parties and politicians (e.g. PAS; The Dignity and Truth Platform Party – PPPDA; Political Party ‘Pro-Moldova’) by presenting them less frequently in the news and by placing news about them near the bottom of the newscasts.

At the beginning of September, on the eve of the start of the election campaign, Dodon was the subject of TV Moldova 1 news – directly or indirectly – in 11% of the content. Also, in the majority of news, Dodon was shown in positive light<sup>36</sup>, often in formats and tone resembling political advertising. News items allowing the president exposure just by virtue of incumbency were frequent. One example – a report on ‘Mesager’, the main news program of TV Moldova 1, from 6 September 2020, in which Dodon ‘officially inaugurated a roundabout in the village Oxentea, Dubăsari rayon’.

TV Moldova 1’s lack of impartiality can be traced as far back as late December 2019, when the channel aired in prime-time a 20-minute film on Dodon’s achievements as president of the country.<sup>37</sup> One member of the Supervisory Council of TRM denounced this as examples of party propaganda, commissioned for political purposes. Ecaterina Stratan, director of TV Moldova 1, argued ‘the film was aired to inform the viewers on the activities of President’s office’.<sup>38</sup>

So, TV Moldova 1 was the media outlet that gave president Dodon’s activities the greatest exposure during all of 2020, thus directly favoring him in a year marked by presidential elections. And for the period immediately before the presidential election in November 2020 (14–28 September), IJC noted that public television again presented the other registered presidential candidates’ platforms in a neutral tone, while giving a clearly positive spin and a greater volume of coverage to Dodon.<sup>39</sup>

**B. Presidential election campaign (first round of the election campaign: 2 October – 29 October; second round of election campaign: 2 November – 13 November 2020).**

**Monitoring by Audiovisual Council (CA).** The monitoring reports by the CA on the presidential election campaign have found that the public media outlets TV Moldova 1 and Radio Moldova had in general provided balanced coverage, without major deviations from legal requirements.<sup>40</sup> Coverage of candidates was mainly neutral. According to the CA, Dodon received the largest share of coverage, followed by Sandu. The other five candidates were covered

34 Interview with Alexandru Cozer, journalist and political analyst, 28 November 2020.

35 Independent Journalism Center, *Monitoring Report MOLDOVA 1 Period: March 9 – 15, 2020*, available in English at <http://media-azi.md/en/monitoring-report-moldova-1-period-mar-ch-9-%E2%80%9315-2020>.

36 Ibidem.

37 Agora.md, *Filmul lui Dodon stârnește contradicții în Consiliul de Supraveghere „Moldova 1”. „În situația de criză trebuia să-ți asumi. Acum nu fă valuri în tază” [Dodon’s film raises contradictions within the members of the Supervisory Board of TRM]*, 18 January 2020, available in Romanian at <https://agora.md/stiri/65907/filmul-lui-dodon-starneste-contradicții-in-consiliul-de-supraveghere-moldova-1-in-situația-de-criză-trebuia-sa-ti-asumi-acum-nu-fa-valuri-in-tazic>.

38 Media-azi.md, *Cum justifică directoarea Moldova 1 difuzarea filmului despre realizările președintelui Dodon: „Nu am făcut nimic ieșit din comun” [How the director of TV Moldova 1 justifies the broadcast of the film about the achievements of President Dodon: „I did nothing out of the ordinary”]*, 17 January 2020, <http://media-azi.md/ro/stiri/video-cum-justific%C4%83-directoarea-moldova-1-difuzarea-filmului-despre-realiz%C4%83rile-pre%C8%99edintelui>.

39 Independent Journalism Center, *Media monitoring during the electoral period and electoral campaign for the presidential elections of November 1, 2020. Report no. 1 (September 14–28, 2020)*, available in English at <http://media-azi.md/en/media-monitoring-during-electoral-period-and-electoral-campaign-presidential-elections-november-1>.

40 Audiovisual Council, *Raport cu privire la rezultatele monitorizării modului de reflectare a campaniei electorale, în turul II de scrutin, în cadrul principalelor buletine de știri de către furnizorii de servicii media audiovizuale [Report of the results of the monitoring the coverage of the electoral campaign, the second round of elections, main news bulletins of the audiovisual media service providers]*, available in Romanian at [http://audiovizual.md/files/RAPORT%20de%20monitorizare%20a%20campaniei%20electorale%20%28Turul%20II%20%29\\_0.pdf](http://audiovizual.md/files/RAPORT%20de%20monitorizare%20a%20campaniei%20electorale%20%28Turul%20II%20%29_0.pdf).

in generally equal portions of air time. Most candidates got neutral coverage in the news programs of TV Moldova 1 and Radio Moldova. The CA's main conclusion was that the public media did not violate legal requirements.<sup>41</sup> However, monitoring missions reported that the regulatory authority acted late and '*...did not take adequate and prompt decisions to ensure fair and unbiased coverage of candidates by all radio broadcasters*'.<sup>42</sup> Also, the final conclusions of ENEMO were that '*the Audiovisual Council showed a limited understanding of its role and responsibility towards the citizens of Moldova during the election campaign, or lack of willingness to address biased media conduct. The supervisory role of the CA was limited to post-factum non dissuasive sanctioning of broadcasters, failing to ensure that voters were provided with unbiased information*'.<sup>43</sup>

Monitoring by the Independent Journalism Center of Moldova (IJC). The more nuanced IJC report showed that public television performed differently at each stage of election campaign. It found that in the first-round campaign (2 October – 29 October), TV Moldova 1 coverage was balanced, covering all candidates more or less neutrally. However, in the second-round campaign (2 November – 13 November 2020), TV Moldova 1 gave Dodon generally neutral but occasionally favourable coverage in news reports. 16% of reports about Dodon presented him in a favourable light. His opponent, Sandu, received mostly neutral coverage on public television.<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, reports of other institutions and monitoring missions – OSCE/OHDIHR – confirmed, that Dodon got more media coverage on public television than Sandu, with 54–46% ratio between the two in the news. OSCE/ODIHR also found that TV Moldova 1 gave Dodon positive media coverage<sup>45</sup>, while Sandu had neutral coverage. Similarly, the

Civic Coalition for Free and Fair Elections (CCALC)<sup>46</sup> in its final declaration stated that although TV Moldova 1 had a balanced approach during most of the election campaign, '*at the debates prior to the second round of voting, public television Moldova 1 changed the rules, which clearly favored the candidate Igor Dodon*'.<sup>47</sup>

**Election debates.** This year because of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was decided that other television stations may re-broadcast the debates from Moldova 1 instead of conducting their own.<sup>48</sup> In the first round of elections (2 October – 29 October), TV Moldova 1 organised eight election debates, attended by all candidates (or by their representatives) except Dodon. He announced on 17 September 2020 that he refuses to take part in the electoral debates in the first round as he wishes to '*focus directly on discussions with the citizens*'.<sup>49</sup> The election debates in the first round were mostly carried out in line with electoral regulations and norms mentioned in the declaration on editorial policy adopted by TRM. Also, during the debates, TV Moldova 1 acted correctly, without favouring or disadvantaging any candidates, giving everybody equal time on air.

In the second-round campaign, public television decided to organise election debates with both candidates: Maia Sandu and Igor Dodon. Sandu rejected the invitation to participate.<sup>50</sup> On 12 November 2020<sup>51</sup> Dodon alone took part in a one-sided "debate". Contrary to its earlier editorial policy TRM, handed over all the time planned for both candidates to Dodon and allowed him more time than previously agreed for his answers. In addition, despite the pandemic, supporters of Dodon were allowed in the studio, although this was never part of the original plan for the debate. Dodon's "debate" was re-broadcast by other television stations, controlled by PSRM: Primul în Moldova

41 Interview with Larisa Manole, member of the Audiovisual Council, 26 November 2020.

42 *Statement: Position of the Civic Coalition for Free and Fair Elections on the Presidential Elections 2020*, 17 November 2020, available in English at <http://alegeri.md/images/8/8b/Pozitia-calc-alegeri-prezidentiale-2020.pdf>.

43 ENEMO International Election Observation Mission Presidential Election, second round 15 November, Moldova 2020, *Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions*, 17 November 2020, available in English at <http://www.enemo.eu/en/missions/moldova-presidential-elections-2020/386-enemo-presented-its-statement-of-preliminary>.

44 Interview with Anastasia Nani, deputy director of Independent Journalism Center from Moldova, 28 November 2020.

45 ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission to the Republic of Moldova. *Presidential Election, Second Round, 15 November 2020, Statement of Preliminary Findings and Preliminary Conclusions*, available in English at <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/3/470424.pdf>.

46 The Civic Coalition for Free and Fair Elections (CCFFE) is a permanent, voluntary entity, comprised of civil society organizations from Moldova, whose aim is to contribute to the development of democracy in Moldova, through advocacy and implementation of free and fair elections according to the standards of ODIHR (OSCE), the European Council and its specialized affiliated institutions. The Coalition carries out its activities during each electoral cycle (pre-election period and electoral period) in elections or referendums of any kind. <https://alegeliber.md/en/>.

47 *Statement: Position of the Civic Coalition for Free and Fair Elections on the Presidential Elections 2020*, 17 November 2020, available in English at <http://alegeri.md/images/8/8b/Pozitia-calc-alegeri-prezidentiale-2020.pdf>.

48 The National Democratic Institute, *Moldova Election Watch*, 14 October 2020, available in English at [https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Moldova\\_Election\\_Watch\\_Report\\_2020%20%28English%29.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Moldova_Election_Watch_Report_2020%20%28English%29.pdf).

49 Info Prim News Agency, Igor Dodon will not take part in electoral debates, 17 September 2020, available in English at [https://www.ipn.md/en/igor-dodon-will-not-take-part-in-electoral-debates-8008\\_1076220.html](https://www.ipn.md/en/igor-dodon-will-not-take-part-in-electoral-debates-8008_1076220.html).

50 Infotag News Agency, *Maia Sandu refused to participate in debate with Igor Dodon before the second round of the Presidential Elections*, 9 November 2020, available in English at <http://www.infotag.md/politics-en/288476/>.

51 The TV Moldova 1 debate from 12 November may be accessed on the following link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7GX4BpP8nw>.

and NTV Moldova.<sup>52</sup> As a result, TRM's partner Promo-LEX accused it of breaking previously agreed on rules for the debate and not informing Promo-LEX of these changes. According to Promo-LEX and media experts, in this case TRM clearly favored Dodon and the debate did not adhere to the best practice of electoral debates carried out by a public television station, as committed to in their own guidelines for political and elections coverage. The TV Moldova director, Ecaterina Stratan responded to the allegations calling them '*unfounded assumptions, and the accusations of alleged concerted actions – downright hallucinatory and totally out of place*'.<sup>53</sup>

**Experts' assesement for TRM presidential elections campaign from November 2020.** The five media experts and CA representative interviewed for this research were asked to assess the public broadcaster's performance in the November 2020 presidential elections, on a scale from 1 to 10, based on criteria of journalistic ethics, TRM's own editorial policy, and the degree of accuracy and impartiality in covering the election campaign and candidates. Four of them awarded TRM 6 points, one 7 points, and one 5 points. The average value of the experts' ratings was 6: a passing grade, however an unsatisfactory one.

## Conclusions

The formal transition from „state” to „public” media in the Republic of Moldova is considered to have ended in 2004, once the legislation on public media was adopted. In reality, however, TRM remains dependent on whatever political parties hold power. Their influence stems from their role of allocating the budget of public media. The funding model for TRM (approx. 90% of its income comes from the state budget) along with the lack of will of the public broadcaster's management to diversify the company's financing is a major problem. As a result, all political parties have taken advantage of this when in power.

The issues raised about TRM's performance during the November 2020 election campaign and the way it covered the candidates, have been – more or less – the same since 1994. Both Radio Moldova, and in particular TV Moldova 1, have largely favoured ruling parties and candidates, at the expense of those in opposition who were ignored or allocated less time. The presidential campaign in November 2020 was no exception. The monitoring reports of media organisations pointed out that TV Moldova 1 has slightly

favoured the candidate of the ruling party – Igor Dodon – by presenting him in a positive light. The other candidates, instead, got less coverage which was largely neutral. Moreover, the election debate before the second round of the elections showed clearly that by accepting only one candidate – Dodon – for the debate, granting him double time on air, changing the rules of the debates without informing the partner organisation and letting supporters into the studio despite the Covid-19 pandemic, public media violated ethical norms, showed lack of fairness, or compliance with pre-agreed debate formats and of its own editorial policy submitted to the CA on the eve of the campaign.

Also, it is imperative to note that the conduct, professionalism, impartiality and fairness of a media outlet is measured not only during election campaigns, but also in the period preceding the election and every time when ethical rules are violated. That is why this research paper is an attempt to draw attention to the fact that in 2020, the public television station TV Moldova covered public events favouring certain politicians and parties, such as the incumbent president Dodon, ministers of the Chicu Government and Ion Ceban (former PSRM member), mayor of Chisinau. And in many instances these news reports demonstrated political partisanship and were more akin to political advertising than journalism.

While this paper cannot be a comprehensive review, past donor assistance initiatives in TRM's transition from state to public broadcaster appeared disjointed and piecemeal rather than providing a single holistic, long-term project that would encompass issues of funding, governance, upgrading technology, professional skills, but most importantly, a focus on the ethics and values of a public broadcaster. These types of programmes were offered in other countries where a similar transition was being made, very extensively, for example, in Ukraine.

There seemed to be a rush to help adapt the broadcaster to the requirements of the digital age, so assisting in technical upgrades of facilities and equipment, and strengthening the skills of technicians and journalists, but with less focus on skills and responsibilities of managers of public media, who are meant to be the firewall shielding journalists from political influence. Among the most thorny issues confronting public service broadcasters in more mature democracies is the tension between public broadcasters receiving public

52 Ziarul de Garda, *Dezbaterile electorale de la televiziunea publică Moldova 1, retransmise de posturile socialiștilor Primul în Moldova și NTV Moldova [Electoral debates from public television Moldova 1 was broadcasted by the Socialists controlled TV channels, Primul in Moldova and NTV Moldova]*, 12 November 2020, available in Romanian at <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/dezbaterile-electorale-de-la-televiziunea-publica-moldova-1-sunt-retransmise-de-posturile-socialistilor-primul-in-moldova-si-ntv-moldova/>.

53 Media-azi.md, *Promo-Lex: The debate organized by Moldova 1 before the second round of elections "contradicts good practices."* TRM comments, 13 November 2020, available in English at <http://media-azi.md/en/stiri/promo-lex-debate-organized-moldova-1-second-round-elections-%E2%80%9Ccontradicts-good-practices%E2%80%9D-trm>.

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funding and the need to maintain editorial independence from government. Different countries have taken different approaches, but there is little evidence that sharing of these experiences and lessons were incorporated in any of the assistance programs offered by international donors.

## Recommendations

### For TRM

- The TRM leadership has to reduce its allegiance to ruling political parties. The funding of this public institution is drawn from citizens' taxes and not funds of political parties which only decide on its allocation. The broadcaster's primary responsibility is to the public;
- The TRM needs to strengthen its business planning and marketing capacity. Strong business management can ensure the financial sustainability of public media, will diversify funding sources, and reduce TRM dependence on money from the state budget, diminishing political influence on the institution;
- The members of the Supervisory Council of TRM, based on the legal framework defining its duties, should scrutinise the editorial policy of TV Moldova 1 and Radio Moldova to ensure it adheres to its public media mission; they should also develop mechanisms to ensure high quality of the content;
- Members of the Supervisory Council of TRM must appoint competent, honest and professional individuals – who prioritise the public and not the political interest – to the broadcasters' leadership;
- The management of TRM should require high levels of professional competence and proven integrity in key positions – heads of departments, editors-in-chief and journalists. This will minimise political interference by the ruling parties;
- The directors and editors of TRM have to ensure that editorial content adheres to the mission of public media, is factual, without bias towards any entity, institution or political party or politician;
- Journalists of TRM should make public interest a priority when selecting topics for news and talk-shows, and ensure factual, accurate and fair reporting.

### For the Audiovisual Council

- The Audiovisual Council, based on its legally mandated role, must monitor the broadcasters for ethical violations or deviations from their obligations and to apply the necessary sanctions when needed – NOT ONLY IN ELECTION CAMPAIGNS;
- The Audiovisual Council, based on its powers, must select professional individuals with a record of integrity as members of the Supervisory Council of TRM, prioritising competence and expertise in the audiovisual field;
- The Audiovisual Council, in accordance with art. 86 (Cooperation with civil society) of the Audiovisual Media Services Code, must be more open and receptive to cooperation with civil society, and respond to monitoring reports of watchdog media organisations.

### For official authorities and political parties in power

- Politicians in power should be aware that the TRM is not an annex of the government or the ruling parties. Thus, they must stop control and/or pressure – directly and/or indirectly – on the public broadcaster;
- Politicians and the parties in power should understand that TRM is a public and not a 'state-owned' or 'official' broadcaster, and is in the service of the citizens of Moldova, who finance the institution through their taxes;
- The Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, the Presidency, Government and civil society – entities that by law can nominate candidates to the Audiovisual Council – should select respected and competent candidates with extensive technical expertise in the field, and not based on political allegiance.

### For donors and international community

- External donors and international implementing organisations should condition support for TRM on its compliance with its own editorial policy, international standards for public service broadcasters, provisions of the Moldovan Journalists' Code of Ethics, and assessments of watchdog organisations of TRM's political and election coverage;

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- To demand that Moldovan authorities cease control – directly or indirectly – over the public media. A strong and independent public media is one of the main elements of a genuine democracy;
  - Provide support for projects educating society on the role of a public service broadcaster, and the public's role in owning and defending it;
  - Support knowledge learning for legislators, regulators and management of the broadcaster on lessons learned in countries with strong public service broadcasting infrastructures.

## List of interviewees

**Report:** Assessment of Public Media Performance in the Presidential Election in Moldova November 2020.

**Conducted by:** Baltic Centre for Media Excellence (Riga, Latvia).

**Researcher:** Victor Gotișan.

### List of interviewees

1. Madalin Necsutu, journalist and political analyst, 29 November 2020.
2. Angela Grămadă, political analyst, President of Experts for Security and Global Affairs Think-tank, 29 November 2020.
3. Alexandru Cozer, journalist and political analyst, 28 November 2020.
4. Valeriu Pașa, political analyst, expert, WatchDog Moldova, 27 November 2020.
5. Anastasia Nani, Deputy Director of Independent Journalism Center of Moldova, 28 November 2020.
6. Ion Bunduchi, media expert, Director of Association of Electronic Press (APEL), 22 November 2020.
7. Viorica Zaharia, media expert, President of Council of Press from Moldova, 27 November 2020.
8. Liliana Vitu, former Editor-in-Chief of TV Moldova 1 (2010-2013), 1 December 2020.
9. Larisa Manole, member of the Audiovisual Council, 26 November 2020.

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December, 2020