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**THE EFFECTS OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN
MASS-MEDIA ON THE PROCESS OF
MOLDOVAN EUROPEANISATION 2017-2022**

MA thesis

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Authorship Declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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Abstract

The Republic of Moldova is an Eastern European state with a complex post-soviet legacy and developing European perspectives. This thesis investigates the evolution of Russian soft power in the televised informative programmes from the Republic of Moldova and its effects over the Moldovan Europeanisation process. The theoretical background is set by the connections among soft power, media influence and information. The empirical analysis looks into the most popular news TV channels and the legislation of the audiovisual services in the Republic of Moldova. Using four indicators, the thesis analyses the Russian influence by drawing the connections between the (foreign) owners of the TV channels and the broadcasted content. In order to assess the Europeanisation process, the thesis examines the political context in which the European audiovisual regulations were transposed in the Moldovan legislation. The results prove that more than half of the analysed channels share pro-Russian narratives, but their effects over the public opinion decreased until the end of 2022, due to the mechanisms and normative acts implemented by the pro-European political actors and the civil society with the help of the European institutions.

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List of Abbreviations

AV	Audiovisual
AV Code	Code of Audiovisual Media Services of the Republic of Moldova
AV Council	Audiovisual Council of the Republic of Moldova
AVMSD	Audiovisual Media Services Directive
BCS	Bloc of Communists and Socialists
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
ECTT	European Convention on Transfrontier Television
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EU	European Union
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PAS	Party of Action and Solidarity
PCRM	Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova
PDM	Democratic Party of Moldova
PPDA	Dignity and Truth Platform Party
PPŞ	Şor Party
PSRM	Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
TV	Television
USA	United States of America

Introduction

With statements like “assertive and independent (...) open and predictable”,¹ the 2016 Russian foreign policy concept document emphasises the role played by the military capabilities in the international system of the 21st century. Furthermore, the document emphasizes Russia’s urge to seek and maintain the great power status after the fall of the Soviet Union and supports advancing expansionist policies towards the post-soviet space.

However, the post-Cold War order changed the focus of international affairs from hard power mechanisms to soft power. Accordingly, the Russian Federation also began to attain new instruments of projecting its power and strengthening its foreign policy. Using mass-media as a means to preserve the Russian political and cultural heritage, the Russian soft power prevented the Republic of Moldova from getting closer to the West, affecting the country’s Europeanisation process. Considering the historical and geopolitical background of the Republic of Moldova, this power game amplified the external East-West split, as well as the division of domestic politics between pro-Russian and pro-European supporters.

The main aim of this thesis is to address the consequences of the Russian influence (and the Moldovan post-soviet legacy) in the Moldovan mass-media between 2017-2022. Accordingly, this thesis analyses how the conjunction between Russian and European soft power influenced both the media legislation and the public opinion and, implicitly, affected the country’s Europeanisation process. For this reason, the thesis aims to tackle the following research question: how did the Russian Federation influence the Moldovan process of Europeanisation between 2017-2022? The approach used in answering the research question is based on media analysis, namely, Russia’s influence on the Moldovan mass-media outlets. The thesis considers mass-media as an important instrument that influences not only the general public opinion, but also a state’s political landscape.

The research is focused on a single-case study and is factor-oriented, seeking to explain the causal relationship between the independent variable “foreign influence on mass-media” and the dependent variable “Europeanisation,” as follows. The thesis looks into the evolution of Russian soft power in the Republic of Moldova between 2017-2022, focusing on the effects of Russian influence in mass-media over the Moldovan Europeanisation process. In doing so,

¹ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation” (Approved by the President of the Russian Federation V. Putin on November 30, 2016), Section II, accessed May 8, 2021, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248

the thesis takes into consideration the approaches of President Dodon (2017-2020) and of President Sandu (2020-present), as well as the political crises that caused significant shifts of power among the governments. This political context is the first indicator used in the analysis of the independent variable (Russian influence in Moldovan media), because it outlines the external links of the politicians, as well as their effects over foreign policy and the media legislation and content.

Then, using media and document analysis, the empirical research outlines the most popular news television (TV) channels according to four indicators: the language of the informative programmes (Romanian/Russian), origin of content (Moldovan productions/foreign re-broadcasts), owner (nationality, political affiliation) and political content style (pro-Russian/neutral/pro-European). Therefore, these indicators are used to point out the connections between local politicians and foreign entities, their links to the most popular news TV channels and their impact on the public opinion. The analyses are based on national surveys, investigations of the independent media institutions and official reports of the TV channels and of the main regulatory body, the Audiovisual Council of the Republic of Moldova (AV Council). The thesis focuses on the monitoring reports and the sanctions given by the AV Council, the political interference in the activity of the AV Council, the compliance of the editorial policy of each TV channel to the regulations and the monitoring activity of independent apolitical national and international organisations.

The dependent variable is conceptualised starting from a theoretical background based on the specialised literature on soft power and Europeanisation, which outlines the connection between the two concepts and delineates the meaning of “Europeanisation” and “European integration.” The timeline of the Europeanisation process is presented by considering the 2004 European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) as a starting point, followed by the 2009 Eastern Partnership, the 2014 Association Agreement, the 2020 pro-European government and the 2022 grant of a membership candidate in the European Union (EU). Then, using policy and document analysis, the Europeanisation process is narrowed down to a comparison between Moldovan and European regulations on audiovisual (AV) services until 2022. Data were retrieved from both the national and international normative acts on media adopted until 2022, among which the Code of Audiovisual Media Services of the Republic of Moldova (AV Code) was the most significant and was amended according to the political interests of the ruling governments between 2017-2022. Therefore, the thesis determines the evolution of pro-Russian/pro-European narratives in mass-media, considering the different approaches of the governments in managing the AV regulations and the political interference in the activity of

the AV Council and the broadcasted content. Furthermore, it analyses the results of the European Council's Action Plans regarding rule of law and the evaluation of Freedom House and of the independent media organisations in transposing the European AV regulations into the national legislation and strengthening the state's democracy.

Framing this topic is relevant in the context of the international challenges that developed between 2017-2022, the new hybrid wars and the geopolitics of the Republic of Moldova. Firstly, information warfare and the disinformation campaigns that developed in the Moldovan mass-media were supported by both Russian and Moldovan entities, especially during the term of President Dodon. The analysis points out the connections between the local and foreign entities and the impact of their actions on the public opinion. At the same time, the thesis highlights the evolution of the Moldovan mass-media and political landscape, focusing on the role of information in shaping the public opinion and safeguarding the state's security. Secondly, the Russian aggression against Ukraine affected not only the economy and the security of the Republic of Moldova, but it also influenced its neutral status in international affairs and expanded the political divisions within the state. Having its security threatened by the war and condemning the actions of the Russian Federation, President Sandu adopted multiple reforms that strengthened the relations with the West, including the candidate application to the EU. At the same time, the pro-European president was confronting with the institutional stalemate created by the previous pro-Russian leadership and the protests organised by the pro-Russian opposition to undermine her power.

The peculiarities of mass-media investigated in this thesis add to the academic works on the European enlargement towards Eastern Europe, the geopolitical challenges of the Republic of Moldova and the evolution of post-soviet states after more than 30 years of independence. The existing literature investigated the phenomenon of foreign and political influence in Moldovan mass-media only during the periods of elections or as annual overviews. Furthermore, the monitoring reports on the evolution of the European Action Plans in the Republic of Moldova address broader issues, such as the rule of law or human rights. For this reason, this thesis systematises and categorises data on the ownership, content and legislation of the AV services between 2017-2022. Thus, the findings contribute to the previous works on the connections between political entities and their involvement in the televised programmes and the AV legislation. Moreover, they highlight the Russian influence over the approaches of President Dodon and President Sandu to the Europeanisation process.

This thesis is divided into three chapters, which outline the theoretical background, the methodology and the case study, followed by the final section of conclusions. The first chapter

introduces and presents the connection between the concepts of: soft power, media influence, information and Europeanisation. Importantly, the subchapter on Europeanisation presents the framework of the EU-Moldova political dialogue, starting from ENP, and focuses on the general aspects of the Europeanisation process, referring to the national political crises and their effects over the European support. The chapter on methodology provides an extensive description of the research design and of the choice and collection of data. At the same time, it highlights the possible research limitations. Furthermore, it introduces the indicators used in the analysis of the variables: the language of the informative programmes, the origin of content, ownership and political content style. The third chapter presents the case study and is divided into three subchapters. The first one provides context for the empirical analysis by outlining the most significant political events from the Republic of Moldova and the involvement of the political actors in the management of the AV services. The second subchapter analyses the most popular Moldovan TV channels, according to the indicators presented in the methodology. This part also includes three tables that highlight the main findings of the in-depth analysis, in order to facilitate the understanding of the topic and categorise the phenomena. The third subchapter analyses the Moldovan Europeanisation process by presenting a comparison between the Moldovan and EU's AV media policies between 2017-2022. In the final section, the thesis outlines the main findings of the research.

1. Theoretical background

1.1 Soft power and media influence

International power politics have been predominantly perceived from the Hobbesian perspective, where the human nature is atrocious. Following T. Hobbes' assertions: "homo homini lupus"² and "bellum omnium contra omnes,"³ societies are at a constant state of war against each other. These maxims have been widely used in academic literature to point out the egoistical interests of states and the role of hard power, just as Thucydides outlined in the Melian Dialogue.⁴ Even if T. Hobbes and Thucydides are considered the fathers of realism, this theory of international relations together with the concept of hard power were conceptualised more clearly only in the last century by J. Mearsheimer and K. Waltz, who focused on the importance of material capabilities and military force.⁵

However, the end of the Cold War changed the international system with states increasingly focusing on the use of soft power to achieve their foreign policy goals. According to J. Nye Jr., "the current instruments of power range from diplomatic notes through economic threats to military coercion."⁶ Therefore, the use of military force is no longer the only means of exerting power. Power is both relative and relational, meaning that there are no absolute terms to define it, because it depends on the cooperation and competition among several powers. The use of "coercion, payment and attraction"⁷ defines the type of power to be used. Therefore, hard power is mostly based on coercion, while soft power is mostly related to attraction. Thus, the power of attraction portrays the capacity of an actor to have an impact on the preferences of others without imposing a threatening behaviour or the carrots and sticks approach. Promoting inclusive and legitimate policies, as well as attractive cultures and values, enables the context for other actors to instinctively engage in common practices and set common agendas.⁸

Considering this new world order after the Cold War, neoliberalism gained primacy over realism and, thus, diminished the use of military force for offensive purposes, while focusing on other elements in the power strategy, such as cultural values and increasing the

² Thomas Hobbes, 1588-1679. *De cive*, (London: J.G. for R. Royston at the Angel in Ivie-lane, 1651), 1.

³ Hobbes, 10.

⁴ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Book V.

⁵ Giulio M. Gallarotti, "Soft power: what it is, why it's important, and the conditions for its effective use," *Journal of Political Power* 4 no.1 (2011): 26-27, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2011.557886>

⁶ Joseph S. Nye, Jr. "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy* no. 80 (Autumn, 1990): 167, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>

⁷ Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 4 (2009): 160, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20699631>.

⁸ Nye Jr., "Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power," 161.

role of policies and sanctions.⁹ However, soft power is not completely related to neoliberalism, but rather to the concept of public diplomacy, which played an important role since the end of the 20th century, also known as the information age. The significant development of technology in the communication sector gave the public access to high volumes of information and, so, made information to be a powerful political tool.¹⁰ Another effect was the polarisation of the public opinion “Information becomes power, especially before it spreads. Thus, a capacity for timely response to new information is a critical power resource.”¹¹

A concrete instrument of soft power is information, which is an element of national power within DIME: diplomacy, information, military and economy.¹² Therefore, information is a relevant instrument for governments to achieve their foreign policy and security objectives because it may influence the opinions and behaviours of the targeted audiences in their favour, as follows.¹³ Firstly, since more people gained access to more sources of information, propaganda and exaggerated claims became important tools for states and other actors to exert influence and their preferences over others.¹⁴ The governments had to focus more on their credibility, because their reputation and legitimacy became as important as their military or economic plans. By analysing the preferences of their target society, each state increases its exertion of soft power through specific mechanisms and systems of diffusing information.¹⁵ For example, the strategy of using rhetoric and discourse control, together with mass-media, is an effective tool through which a political actor can gain dominance.¹⁶ When one narrative becomes more popular than the other, the actor who advocated it first gains, implicitly, more power in world politics. However, in order to gain rhetoric and discourse control, political actors depend on the accessibility to media, which can be censored or banned for the public in some areas, giving more power to one side. At the same time, one may create a dominant discourse by using other means than verbal and written communications in order to capture the attention of the public, such as “visual actions, rhetorical actions, protests.”¹⁷

⁹ Nye Jr., “Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power,” 161.

¹⁰ Joseph S. Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (2008): 99, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25097996>.

⁶ Nye, Jr. “Soft Power,” 164.

¹² Scott Fisher, Graig R. Klein and Juste Codjo, “FOCUSdata: Foreign Policy through Language and Sentiment,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* (2022): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orac002>

¹³ Fisher, Klein and Codjo, 2-3.

¹⁴ Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” 99.

¹⁵ Steven B. Rothman, “Revising the soft power concept: what are the means and mechanisms of soft power?” *Journal of Political Power* 4 no. 1 (2011): 59, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2011.556346>

¹⁶ Rothman, 59.

¹⁷ Rothman, 59-60.

Secondly, audiences tend to be interested in new actors and subjects, which are covered by the mass-media for the first time, rather than the common figures.¹⁸ For this reason, the governments use the power of information in their favour, through official communiques and mass-media.¹⁹ The former consist of direct statements from the government, which present the events in accordance with the official position of the state. The latter refers to TV, newspapers and online news articles that are coordinated by media agencies, which may or may not be independent. As a result, in order to have access to objective information, the population prefers to inform itself from mass-media rather than from official communiques.²⁰ However, the governments that aim to increase their power and are aware of the public's preferences for mass-media, created strategies that rely on the control of mass-media outlets and included them in their "information toolkit."²¹ Therefore, governments use the power of information in their favour, controlling the media agencies and shape the public opinion according to their own political views.²² Considering that this practice infringes upon the democratic principles, it is common to be pursued by unstable governments, which claim to support freedom of speech, but dominate the independent media.

For example, in 2020, Freedom House decreased the rank of Poland in the index of democracy from a consolidated democracy to a semi-consolidated democracy.²³ Even if Polish mass-media was well developed compared to other countries in the region, the report declared that the right to freedom of speech was respected, while the independence of media was decreased by the involvement and interests of the political actors in controlling TV channels.²⁴ Considering the lack of ownership transparency and the political funding for specific outlets, it became unclear which media sources were biased. Consequently, the government developed a strategy of effectively promoting its agenda using mass-media as a primary tool by getting involved in the management of the TV broadcasters.²⁵ Thus, the members of the ruling party attended mostly the shows of the TV channels that they controlled.²⁶ As a consequence, the

¹⁸ Rothman, 50-60.

¹⁹ Fisher, Klein and Codjo, 4.

²⁰ Fisher, Klein and Codjo, 4.

²¹ Fisher, Klein and Codjo, 3-4.

²² Fisher, Klein and Codjo, 4.

²³ Freedom House, "Nations in Transit 2020," ed. Noah Buyon, Shannon O'Toole, Tyler Roylance, and Mike Smeltzer, (2020), 3.

²⁴ Freedom House, "Nations in Transit 2022 Methodology," (2022), <https://freedomhouse.org/reports/nations-transit/nations-transit-methodology>

²⁵ Wojciech Czuchnowski and Katarzyna Korzeniowska, "Poland's free media is shrinking" *International Press Institute and Gazeta Wyborcza*, February 3, 2022, accessed March 20, 2023, <https://ipi.media/polands-free-media-is-shrinking-gazeta-wyborcza/>

²⁶ Czuchnowski and Korzeniowska.

Polish population had the option to inform either from official communiques, which, essentially, presented the political position of the government, or mass-media, which was mostly controlled by the government. Thus, the additional influence over mass-media meant monopolising the information that contributed to the creation of public opinion. Furthermore, it determined journalists to self-censor, decreased the pluralism of opinions and democratic values.²⁷ The case of Poland is only one of the many examples given by Freedom House, which demonstrates that if the independence of the mass-media sector is weak, then it is easier for the government to control its content and the public opinion. For this reason, the thesis investigates the role of information and mass-media as instruments of the government's soft power strategy. The case of the Republic of Moldova is outlined in the third chapter by looking into how Moldovan mass-media was affected by Russian influence either directly or indirectly, through pro-Russian political actors.

Considering that the security of a state can nowadays be threatened through both territorial aggression and information manipulation, great powers developed a new approach that combines both hard and soft power, known as "smart power."²⁸ This strategy is continuously developing in the current international framework and it is relevant, to a large extent, to the analysis of post-soviet states. In order to keep its influence over the post-Soviet area, the Russian Federation adapted its foreign policy to this new international dimension, too. Therefore, it developed more indirect and noncoercive methods that strengthened its soft power. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation has been facing a crisis of identity, which worsened because of both Russian and Western media.²⁹ The former was publishing content meant to upgrade the image of Russian elites instead of Russia as a state, while the latter was more interested in presenting news about Russian rather than Western politics.³⁰ Furthermore, they both malignly influenced the public opinion because they presented exaggerated or hyperbolised claims about Russian developments.³¹ Thus, the information spread through mass-media weakened the image of Russia and, consequently, negatively influenced its political position in the world.³²

In order to combat this issue domestically, the Russian government adopted a specific strategy in communicating with its citizens, through mass public culture.³³ In particular, this

²⁷ Freedom House, "Nations in Transit 2022 Methodology."

²⁸ Nye, 94.

²⁹ Keith Dinnie, *Nation Branding* (Great Britain: Elsevier Ltd., 2008), 108-109.

³⁰ Dinnie, 108-109.

³¹ Dinnie, 108-109.

³² Dinnie, 108-109.

³³ Dinnie, 113.

strategy referred to the visual expression of the national identity through patriotic manifestations, powerful political actors or symbols.³⁴ For example, the Moscow Victory Parade or the New Year's President's speech are two annual events, which strengthen the narratives of the victorious historical position of Russia and its prosperous development throughout time. As a result, these actions consolidated the national identity based on visual elements and improved Russia's image in mass media, both domestically and internationally.

Considering the great power status and supremacy pursued in Russian foreign policy, the Russian soft power is attracting potential foreign investors or sympathisers of its culture by promoting a strong and prosperous image of itself. For example, promoting Russian heritage abroad through academic or scientific exchange programmes was an important factor of strengthening its nation branding, which previously suffered because of Western media.³⁵ Likewise, influential associates of Kremlin (responsible for the mediation between Kremlin and Donbass separatists or the leaders of Republika Srpska) organised think tanks and media groups, such as Katehon and Tsargrad, and religious events that furthered the Russian legacy both nationally and internationally.³⁶ Thus, the Russian Federation is using its own channels to address the common historical memories, create a positive image about the Russian leadership, as well as to attract foreign partners and expand its markets.³⁷ Furthermore, using the power of example, the Russian Federation continued to have an influential agenda in the post-Soviet states, in order to emphasize its values and policies, as presented in the case study of this thesis. Furthermore, it did not give up the use of coercive methods and hard power during several conflicts, such as the Transnistrian war and the Russo-Georgian war, respectively. Thus, its strategy combines persuasion and threats with the ability to attract.

However, soft power is neither a positive nor a negative asset because it depends on the perspective of the state in question. In terms of effectiveness, soft power can be regarded as a neutral concept because the soft power applied by one state to another may be beneficial or not, depending on its goals. For example, during Mr. Dodon's presidency, Russian soft power was perceived positively by the Moldovan government, while during Ms. Sandu's presidency it was actively rejected, because it was opposed to her political views. The role of both Russian and European soft power is to attract the dominated actor on their own respective sides.

³⁴ Dinnie, 113.

³⁵ Dinnie, 107-109.

³⁶ Sorin Ioniță, WatchDog.MD, "Influența rusă în regiunea Europei de Est și dincolo de ea" [Russian influence in the Eastern European region and beyond], no. 76 (May 2019), 13, <https://expertforum.ro/influenta-rusa-europa-est/>

³⁷ Dinnie, 109.

Considering the historical background of the Republic of Moldova, the Russian soft power over the former decreased its effects after the fall of the Soviet Union. Opposingly, the European soft power is strengthening more and more in the Eastern European neighbourhood, due to its targeted policies and the local pro-European supporters.

Romania, Moldova and Russian influence, compare-and-contrast

The will of the government to stop propaganda			
Yes	No		
Ukraine	Moldova (direct, "with invitation")	Yes	Favourable environment for Russian propaganda
Baltic states (actively rejected)	Romania (subtle, indirect)	No	

Report Expert Forum (Official publication)

Fig. 1. The accessibility of Russian Propaganda in Ukraine, Moldova, the Baltic states and Romania in 2019.³⁸

The effectiveness of soft power depends on the social and political circumstances present in each country. As illustrated in Fig. 1, these circumstances refer to “the will of the government to stop the propaganda” and the type of environment where propaganda is targeted. Analysing the situation in the Republic of Moldova, the “will of the government” is to be found in the ideologies and goals of the Moldovan politicians, as well as their links to other foreign political elites. The type of environment refers to the reaction of the Moldovan society to the pro-Russian mass-media and the cultural and ideological similarities between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Moldova. The elements that outline the environment also include the presence of the Russian-speaking community, the popularity of the Russian language that facilitates spreading Russian narratives, the dual citizenship and the historical identity related to the Soviet Union.³⁹ The Russian-speaking community is one of the most influential factors, because it is related to the concepts of “Russkiy Mir” (Russian world) and

³⁸ Sorin Ioniță, Otilia Nuțu and Septimius Pârnu, “The rebirth of populism in Eastern Europe” [in Romanian], EFOR, March 2019, 28, translated figure, <http://www.expertforum.ro/raport-anual-2019>

³⁹ Ioniță, Nuțu and Pârnu, 24.

“sootechestvenniki” (compatriots), which have a broad meaning, referring to ethnic Russians who live abroad and anyone who identifies as Russian.⁴⁰ These communities are key to strengthening the Russian soft power, as they are mobilised to support pro-Russian politics and the cultural realm by sharing the propaganda.⁴¹

Fig. 1 shows that the Republic of Moldova had a favourable environment for Russian propaganda and no will to stop it, due to the activity of the pro-Russian politicians and the presidency of Mr. Dodon during 2019. If Fig. 1 would be adapted to the situation of Moldovan politics in 2022, the place of the Republic of Moldova would be closer to Ukraine and the Baltic states, somewhere in between them.⁴² As outlined in the third chapter, the will to stop the Russian propaganda would be higher in 2022, due to the pro-European government and the approach of President Sandu. At the same time, in 2022, the environment for Russian propaganda would be less favourable, due to the increasing pro-European perceptions of the population and the EU candidate status of the Republic of Moldova.

Accordingly, the thesis’s aim to prove the effects of Russian influence over the Moldovan Europeanisation process is grounded on the interdependence among soft power, information and media influence. Information is the main soft power instrument used by the Russian Federation to increase its influence on the Republic of Moldova. Its strategy of using mass-media as an effective means to consolidate its sphere of influence affects the political landscape, the public opinion and, most importantly, the state’s Europeanisation process, which is introduced in the next subchapter.

1.2 Moldovan Europeanisation

One of the most relevant examples of European soft power is the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), launched in 2004, which supports the European perspectives of the neighbouring countries that are not yet members of the EU. Considering its objectives and aims, ENP is part of the Europeanisation process of EU’s neighbouring countries. This policy encourages the aspiring countries to adapt their organisational framework to European standards and has a progressive approach, which takes into consideration the preferences of the ENP countries.⁴³ Thus, the EU presents its framework and values, offers the necessary

⁴⁰ Ioniță and WatchDog.MD, 8.

⁴¹ Ioniță and WatchDog.MD, 8.

⁴² H.E. Mr. V. Chirilă (Ambassador of the Republic of Moldova to Romania) discussion, August 3, 2022.

⁴³ Sandra Lavenex, “A governance perspective on the European neighbourhood policy integration beyond conditionality,” *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 15 no. 6 (February 2011): 944, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13501760802196879>

monitoring mechanisms and then adopts different Action Plans with each country, leaving them the possibility to engage in these commitments according to their own interests and needs.⁴⁴ Therefore, the negotiations are never taking place with multiple candidates at a time and the integration process is realised through joint regulatory structures, which consider the needs of both sides.⁴⁵ They jointly decide upon the degree of involvement, without imposing full adjustment to the EU's *acquis* or involvement in the sectoral governance structures.⁴⁶

Furthermore, it is necessary to mention the link between ENP and the enlargement policy, since both reflect European soft power. Essentially, the former was created as a regulatory tool for the latter. Considering that at the end of the 20th century the Eastern neighbouring countries had gained their independence from the Soviet Union, the sphere of influence in that region was not clearly defined and the risk of conflict escalation was high. Therefore, EU policymakers established these two separate mechanisms of enlargement, in order to peacefully manage the post-Cold War order and create certain limits in the enlargement process. They developed political, social and economic reforms, in order to create an interdependence and include the neighbouring states in the European framework, but not within the whole EU's structure and territory.⁴⁷ For this reason, the main difference between ENP and the enlargement policy is that the former does not require from the neighbouring states an intense commitment for domestic policy changes, nor guarantees their future membership in the EU. Therefore, the ENP is an instrument of European soft power, which contributes to the gradual association of EU with potential candidates. The policy is jointly regulated, in order to meet the requirements of both sides and, at the same time, "avoid new dividing lines in Europe."⁴⁸ Consequently, it represents the instrument through which EU can adjust the relations with its neighbouring countries.

The Republic of Moldova became part of the ENP instead of the enlargement policy due to two main reasons related to geopolitics. On the one hand, the country is located in an area close to Europe with cultural and political practices considered to be integral to the

⁴⁴ Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield and Tim Dunne, *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 445.

⁴⁵ Lavenex, 944.

⁴⁶ Smith, Hadfield and Dunne, 445.

⁴⁷ Eiki Berg and Piret Ehin, "What Kind of Border Regime is in the Making?," *Cooperation and Conflict: Journal of the Nordic International Studies Association*, Vol. 41 no. 1 (2006): 60, DOI: 10.1177/0010836706060935

⁴⁸ Lavenex, 944.

European environment.⁴⁹ This represented the positive reason for its association with Europe.⁵⁰ On the other hand, various regional powers exerted their influence throughout history over the Moldovan territory, the most recent one being the Soviet legacy.⁵¹ After the Republic of Moldova gained its sovereignty from the Soviet Union, it shifted several times its political interests of cooperation among EU, the Russian Federation and Romania. In the first part of the 1990s, it considered the possibility of uniting with Romania, but then it joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).⁵² At the beginning of the 2000s, the Western European countries considered that it is better to start a cooperation process with the Republic of Moldova, but they respected a certain limit by perceiving it as a buffer zone territory.⁵³ Thus, the Republic of Moldova joined the ENP, while it was still cooperating with the Russian Federation in multiple sectors. Even if the Russian Federation was also included in the initial plans of ENP, the discussions concluded that the European and Russian values are contradicting regarding the enlargement.⁵⁴ At the same time, the European perspectives concerning the Republic of Moldova changed after the 2004 and 2007 enlargements. Since it faced historical challenges in the enlargement Eastwards, the EU tried to avoid a competition with the Russian Federation by not including the Republic of Moldova in the main enlargement process. However, in order to strengthen its security, the EU developed several cooperation initiatives with the Republic of Moldova. Consequently, the 2014 Association Agreement and the 2015 ENP review were a result of the new international challenges and the proximity between European and Russian spheres of influence.⁵⁵

Both agreements, together with many other Action Plans and directives launched until 2022, strengthened democracy in the Republic of Moldova and its relations with the EU. Hence, the entire framework of the bilateral cooperation determines their common aspirations and is monitored by their respective bodies.⁵⁶ Importantly, the cooperation with the European

⁴⁹ Francesco Privitera, "Post-socialist transition and EU enlargement eastwards," (class lecture, University of Bologna, November 18, 2022).

⁵⁰ Privitera.

⁵¹ Privitera.

⁵² The Commonwealth of Independent States is an intergovernmental organization, created in 1991 by the Russian Federation, Belarus and Ukraine to promote the cooperation among the former-soviet republics in Eurasia.

⁵³ Michael Emerson, "European Neighbourhood Policy Strategy or Placebo," *CEPS* no. 215 (November 2004), 8.

⁵⁴ Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, "Geostrategies of the European Neighbourhood Policy," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 14, no. 3 (2008): 536, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066108092311>

⁵⁵ European Commission, "Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy," SWD(2015) 500 final, November 18, 2015.

⁵⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova, "Moldova-EU relations," accessed April 2, 2023, <https://mfa.gov.md/en/content/moldova-eu-relations>

institutions defines the Europeanisation process and contributes to the aim of the Republic of Moldova to be integrated in the European political and economic space.⁵⁷ Moreover, the Europeanisation process is driven by the willingness and commitment of the Moldovan political class to strengthen the democracy and increase the political and economic cohesion.⁵⁸

However, the evolution of the bilateral relations was not in a constant growth. While in 2012 the Republic of Moldova was considered by the EU as “the most important partner to have committed itself in plenary,”⁵⁹ the domestic economic and political problems that appeared afterwards affected the bilateral cooperation, especially in regard to the Eastern Partnership.⁶⁰ The 2014 bank fraud and the 2018 invalidation of local elections in Chişinău were important factors that weakened the Moldovan performance and led to the suspensions of the EU’s budgetary support.⁶¹

Moreover, the state encountered many turning points in 2019 because of multiple changes of governments and political crises between the pro-Russian and pro-European political elites, detailed in the third chapter of the thesis. The new coalition formed in June 2019 between the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM) and Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) was an important event for Moldovan politics, because it created a cooperation between parties with different political views, in order to restore democracy. At the same time, it was a turning point in the relations with the EU, due to the activity of Prime Minister Sandu, who cooperated with the West in the reform of the judicial system, fighting corruption and working on the Moldovan Europeanisation process. However, another government was formed in November 2019 with members from PSRM and the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM), which strengthened the state’s relations with the Russian Federation and did not further many points from the common agenda with the EU, such as increasing the transparency and the involvement of the civil society in the decision-making process.⁶² Limiting the power of Ms. Sandu represented a step back in the cooperation with the EU: “Any change to her resolute action to reform the country over the last 5 months would have severe consequences on EU support.”⁶³ Thus, the Republic of Moldova did not receive the third

⁵⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova.

⁵⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova.

⁵⁹ Iurie Gotișan, “Eastern Partnership and Moldova: Recent Trends,” *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs* 28, no. 1/2 (2019): 94, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26898333>.

⁶⁰ Gotișan, 95.

⁶¹ European Parliament, “Resolution of 5 July 2018 on the political crisis in Moldova following the invalidation of the mayoral elections in Chişinău”, 2018/2783(RSP), July 5, 2018.

⁶² Gotișan, 97–98.

⁶³ Matei Rosca, “Moldova’s coalition government falls,” *POLITICO*, November 12, 2019, accessed March 5, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/coalition-government-fall-moldova/>

tranche of EU financial assistance in 2019 and, also, it lacked a national planning document for 2020 regarding its association agreements with the EU.⁶⁴ The bilateral relations were renewed at the end of 2020, when Ms. Sandu won the presidential elections and refocused the Moldovan foreign policy towards the bilateral agenda with the EU and gained support for strengthening the democratic values and restoring the territorial integrity of the state.⁶⁵ Thus, the political dialogue between the EU and the Republic of Moldova encountered different phases of progress, the most beneficial ones being during the pro-European governments.

As an effect of these political changes, the implementation rate of the Association Agreement at national level was slow, reaching only 64.68% in 2019.⁶⁶ Since the main factors that influenced the process were the low performance of public institutions, corruption and the contradictory political will of the governments, the civil society assessed the developments as slow and ineffective.⁶⁷ Furthermore, these reforms were also influenced by the Russian Federation, which collaborated with President Dodon and PSRM in order to politicise the process and keep the state's orientation towards the East.⁶⁸ As a consequence, the popularity of the EU was lower than the Russian Federation, opinion polls showing 40% preference for the former and 60% for the latter.⁶⁹ However, despite this influence, Moldovan economy succeeded to increase its dependency towards the EU. The exports to the EU increased from 46.9% in 2012 to 65.8% in 2017, while the exports to CIS countries decreased from 42.9% to 19.1%, respectively.⁷⁰ Therefore, the Moldovan market increased its dependency to the EU, mostly due to the impact of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement.⁷¹

Thus, the implementation of the cooperation agreements registered certain developments, but faced numerous challenges, most of them being of political nature and controlled by the pro-Russian elite. At the same time, the Europeanisation process focused more on the technical details of implementing the policies, rather than an open dialogue that involved the civil society. Considering the purpose of this thesis, the role of information and public perception of the Europeanisation process matters more than other developments. For

⁶⁴ Aap Neljas, "Analysis of Moldovan Political Situation and Reforms 2019-2021," (Estonian Center of Eastern Partnership, June 2022), 6-7.

⁶⁵ Neljas, 7

⁶⁶ Gotișan, 100.

⁶⁷ Gotișan, 102.

⁶⁸ Gotișan, 110.

⁶⁹ Gotișan, 110.

⁷⁰ Adrian Lupușor and Vadim Gumene, "The economic impact after 4 years of implementation of the RM-EU Association Agreement" [in Romanian], (Chișinău: September 14, 2018), 10.

⁷¹ Gotișan, 96.

this reason, it is important to point out that, until 2020, the government's approach regarding the Europeanisation process did not focus on public engagement in the policy-making process.

Starting from this background of the Europeanisation process, the empirical analysis looks into the European-Moldovan agreements and action plans related to mass-media and AV regulations between 2017-2022. Accordingly, it contributes to the literature on Moldovan geopolitics and the challenges of EU's enlargement Eastwards by investigating the Russian influence on Moldovan TV channels and its impact on the public opinion and the EU-Moldova relations.

2. Methodology

Considering the different approaches of the Russian Federation and the EU to international affairs, any influence coming from the Russian Federation towards a prospective EU member state is affecting its adjustment process to the EU legislative framework and lowers its chances of concluding common agreements or becoming a member state. The Republic of Moldova is a post-Soviet country with a political class divided between pro-Russians and pro-Europeans. At the same time, it is officially a democratic state, where the public opinion should be one of the most powerful factors in the policy-making process. The question is how the Moldovan public opinion is constrained or influenced by the division between the political elites. Therefore, the Russian influence is a factor that needs to be addressed in the analysis of the Moldovan Europeanisation process.

The thesis aims to tackle the following research question: how did the Russian Federation influence the Moldovan process of Europeanisation between 2017-2022? Furthermore, the thesis presents the causal relationship between the independent variable “foreign influence on mass-media”, which refers particularly to the Russian Federation, and the dependent variable “Europeanisation”, which refers particularly to the case of the Republic of Moldova. In doing so, the thesis focuses on a detailed media analysis of the most popular sources of information for Moldovans - TV channels, their impact on the population’s political views and the AV regulations. The outcomes of the research will help in drawing the conclusions regarding the Russian influence of the Moldovan mass-media and of the Europeanisation process.

The thesis sets to analyse two periods: the term of President Dodon between 2017-2020⁷² and the term of President Sandu between 2020-2022. Considering the opposed views of the presidents (pro-Russian and pro-European, respectively), the analysis of these periods outlines the presidents’ and governments’ different approaches regarding the foreign influence on the mass-media sector. Furthermore, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022 was also an important feature of the Russian influence on the Moldovan mass-media. On the one hand, many disinformation campaigns and biased news negatively affected the public opinion regarding the evolution of the war and Moldovan foreign policy. On the other hand, the security threats created by the Russian aggression furthered the Moldovan Europeanisation process towards the moment of receiving an EU candidate status. Thus, the thesis investigates the

⁷² Even if President Dodon started its term in December 2016, its influence over the AV content and legislation was noticed only in 2017.

political context of these periods, in order to outline the multiple political crises that shifted the power between pro-Russian and pro-European politicians, their effects over the development of media legislation, as well as the involvement of local politicians and foreign entities in managing the pro-Russian and pro-European narratives in mass-media.

The research design is factor-oriented, as it seeks to investigate the Russian influence of Moldovan mass-media and explain its consequences on the Moldovan Europeanisation process between 2017-2022. As a result, the thesis demonstrates the causal relation between the independent and dependent variable. The empirical analysis is focused on a single case study, in order to increase the intensity of an in-depth examination.⁷³ Consequently, the analysis takes into consideration the political context of the period 2017-2022 and investigates the most popular TV channels in the Republic of Moldova. Namely, it outlines whether they respect the AV regulations, who are their owners, what is their political affiliation, and how they influence the political opinion of their public. All of these are included in the set of indicators that measure the independent variable, as presented below.

The independent variable “foreign influence on mass-media” refers to any connection of a Moldovan TV channel to the Russian Federation either by language, nationality or ownership. Therefore, I chose an experience-near concept, in order to tackle Russian interference in general. Other ways to approach this variable are through the meaning of “propaganda”, “soft power”, “disinformation”. These are part of the conceptual background of the independent variable and, as previously set by the theoretical framework, the connection between soft power, (dis)information and media influence is significant for the central argument of the thesis. However, they are experience-distant concepts, which would be unfeasible to measure and decrease the validity of the study. For this reason, “foreign influence on mass-media” is a suitable variable for the research and puts forward a more precise understanding of the issue, in order to include all the aspects of the research problem.

Multiple TV channels are used for measuring the independent variable. Throughout the thesis, “TV channels” and “TV broadcasters” are used interchangeably. The thesis is focused only on TV channels because these are the main, as well as the most trusted, sources of information for the Moldovan public. Although there is a decrease in the popularity of TV among Moldovan citizens from 79.7% in 2017⁷⁴ to 72.3% in 2022⁷⁵, it should be noticed that

⁷³ Todd Landman, *Issues and Methods in Comparative Politics: An Introduction*, (Routledge, 2008), 90.

⁷⁴ The Public Policy Institute, “The barometer of public opinion” [in Romanian], The Republic of Moldova, November 2017, 28.

⁷⁵ The Public Policy Institute, “The barometer of public opinion” [in Romanian], The Republic of Moldova, November 2022, 26.

this source of information is still more popular than the internet, which was preferred only by 48.1% in 2017⁷⁶ and 68.8% in 2022.⁷⁷ For this reason, it is relevant to analyse the Russian influence on Moldovan televised media, as it targets the highest percentages of the population, which form their opinion based on biased political information.

The TV channels analysed in this thesis are Prime TV, Canal 2, Canal 3, Publika TV, RTR Moldova, NTV Moldova, Primul în Moldova, Moldova 1, ProTV Chişinău, Jurnal TV and TV8. The TV channels were selected based on the national surveys that show the most popular news TV channels in the Republic of Moldova.⁷⁸ The surveys were conducted in Romanian and were realised by the Public Policy Institute and the Centre for Independent Journalism (apolitical Moldovan institutions). There were selected all the TV channels that obtained more than 5% in the surveys from 2017 and 2021. The surveys were selected from 2017 and 2021 because these represent the first year in office of President Dodon and President Sandu, respectively. These years are relevant for the research, because they emphasise which were the most popular TV channels at the beginning of each president's term, thus, linking the political context with the influence of mass-media and of the public opinion. Consequently, the research systematises the TV preferences of the Moldovan audience in the first year of each presidency and, then, categorises the phenomena in order to assess the foreign influence, as follows.

Each TV channel is categorised and analysed according to 4 indicators: origin of content, language, ownership and political content style. The main findings of the analysis are highlighted in the next chapter in three tables, which systematise the TV channels based on their similarities of ownership and political narratives. Before explaining each indicator, it is important to mention that the TV channels are required by law to publish annual reports regarding their activity (i.e. the origin and language of programmes) and the transparency of ownership.⁷⁹ Furthermore, the AV Council is the regulatory body that manages the activity of the TV channels, based on the AV Code.⁸⁰ The AV Council gives sanctions (fines and public notices) based on its monitoring activity and on the notices received from the society. Considering the aim of this thesis, there were taken into consideration only the sanctions related to the origin of the general content, the language of the informative programmes (Article 4 and

⁷⁶ The Public Policy Institute, November 2017, 28.

⁷⁷ The Public Policy Institute, November 2022, 26.

⁷⁸ See Appendix A and Appendix B.

⁷⁹ AV Council, "Analysis of the annual reports for 2021 of television media service providers from the Republic of Moldova" [in Romanian], (June 2022), 1.

⁸⁰ The AV Code is the main normative act for the AV services in the Republic of Moldova. Chapter 3 outlines the in-depth analysis about both the AV Council and the AV Code.

Article 11 of the new AV Code), ensuring a correct information (Article 13 of the new AV Code) and any other transgression related to political content and foreign informative programmes. Significantly, the independent media institutions also monitor the content of the TV channels, especially the news bulletins during the electoral periods.

Consequently, the analysis is based on the official declarations of the channels, the decisions and sanctions given by the AV Council, the investigations of the Moldovan investigative newspaper “Ziarul de Gardă” and the reports of Moldovan independent media organisations (The Association of Independent Press, The Public Policy Institute, The Centre for Independent Journalism, RISE Moldova and WatchdogMD). Furthermore, to increase the reliability of the results, there were also used foreign reports and studies, realised by the Romanian apolitical think tank Expert Forum, Freedom House and the US Agency for International Development.

The indicator “origin of content” refers to all the programmes broadcasted by each TV channel, regardless of their type (entertainment, social, etc.). Considering that the thesis analyses the presence of foreign soft power in mass-media, it is significant to look at the origin of all the types of programmes and highlight the support for foreign cultures. Each TV channel is required to respect the regulations stipulated in the AV code on the origin of the broadcasted programmes, which are divided in three categories. Firstly, they must fulfil a certain quota (depending on the type of channel) of original content/produced under the jurisdiction of the Republic of Moldova. Secondly, the channels must fulfil a certain quota of “European works.” Thirdly, the channels are allowed to re-broadcast foreign content only according to certain limits (depending on the type of channel). It is important to mention that the regulations regarding “European works” and the origin of the re-broadcasted content was changed several times in the AV Code between 2017-2022. Furthermore, data on the fulfilment of these quotas are available in the official annual reports of the TV channels, which are required by law to be published on their websites. However, in the cases where the reports were not available, data were retrieved from the official reports of the AV Council, which include the fines and public notices given to the TV channels that did not respect the regulations on the origin of their content. Therefore, the empirical analysis outlines the origin of the broadcasted content of each TV channel based on these three categories, and, where data are available, the exact quota of the broadcasted content. On the one hand, this indicator is relevant for the purpose of the thesis, because it shows the origin of the programmes and the narratives that are promoted. Thus, it emphasises the proportions between Russian and locally-produced content. On the other hand,

it demonstrates which TV channels violated the law on the origin of content and if they were sanctioned for it.

The indicator “language” refers only to the news bulletins and informative programmes of the TV channels. Depending on the type of TV channel, the law imposes a specific quota on general and informative content in the Romanian language. As previously mentioned, the TV channels are required by law to publish online the annual reports about their content, including the language of transmission. In the cases where the reports were not available, data were retrieved from the TV schedules’ archives or by analysing the sanctions given by the AV Council. The main purpose of this indicator is to emphasize the link between the language and the type of information transmitted by the news programmes. Additionally, it outlines whether the target group of the channel is Romanian or Russian speaking and whether the channel respected the regulations.

The indicator “ownership” analyses multiple components. Firstly, each TV channel has a director/administrator. Secondly, the licence of a TV channel is owned by a company, which has a beneficial owner. The in-depth analysis realised in the third chapter presents the nationality, political affiliation and the external relations of each director/administrator and beneficial owner. In doing so, the names and nationalities of the owners are retrieved from the official declarations of the TV channels on the transparency of ownership (where they are available) and from the AV Council’s publications on the transparency of ownership of all the Moldovan TV channels. Information about the personal and political background of the owners is retrieved from their official profiles posted on the website of the Moldovan Parliament and on the official informative platform for elections (alegeri.md), the investigations realised by “RISE Moldova” and “Ziarul de Gardă” and the press releases of the US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control. Consequently, this indicator reflects relevant information about the owners, which is used in concluding the foreign influence and the political affiliation of each TV channel.

The indicator “political content style” refers only to the political content broadcasted during the news bulletins and informative programmes of each TV channel. Furthermore, the analysis is based on the other 3 indicators (“origin of content,” “language” and “ownership”) and on the results of the qualitative analysis of the AV Council’s annual reports and the monitoring reports realised by national independent media institutions. Therefore, the political content style was declared as pro-Russian/neutral/pro-European based on the background of their owners, and the results of the monitoring reports and sanctions, which showed whether the programmes presented biased information. The tables presented in the next chapter outline

this indicator in two periods: 2017 and 2022, in order to compare and contrast how the media landscape changed throughout the entire period of analysis, depending on the president, government and legislation in force. Therefore, this indicator shows whether these TV channels changed their political bias and adapted to the national and European regulations of the AV services until 2022.

The dependent variable “Europeanisation” is conceptualised using an experience-distant concept. This requires a thorough explanation, in order to clarify the research problem and the aim of the thesis. Consequently, “Europeanisation” refers to the process of adapting the Moldovan mass-media to EU values, eliminating the post-soviet or other foreign influences. The conceptualisation of this variable is done using the explanation of Europeanisation by Börzel and Risse: “(...) emergence and development at the European level of distinct structures of governance, that is, of political legal and social institutions associated with political problem solving that formalizes interactions among the actors, and of policy networks specializing in the creation of authoritative European rules.”⁸¹ In order to delineate the conceptualisation of “Europeanisation,” the thesis takes into consideration its connection to the concept of “European integration,” as they are similar and in a dependent relationship.⁸² Therefore, the approach used in the thesis differentiates them by considering Europeanisation a process that includes both EU and non-EU member states.⁸³ Furthermore, Europeanisation is a bottom-up process that considers the organisational system and identity of both the EU and the state in question (i.e. The Republic of Moldova).⁸⁴ Therefore, it includes the “local discourse logic, identities, political structures and public policies; it stresses the importance of change in the logic of political behaviour.”⁸⁵ Opposingly, “European integration” is focused on the technical, organisational and functional aspects of the EU.⁸⁶ It is a top-down approach that sets policies at European level, which have subsequent effects over the national governments and the civil society, in order to create a “common European space.”⁸⁷

For this reason, the thesis clarifies that Moldovan Europeanisation means that even if the Republic of Moldova was not an EU candidate until 2022, it concluded many partnerships

⁸¹ Tanja A. Börzel, Thomas Risse, “When Europe Hits Home: Europeanization and Domestic Change,” *European Integration online papers*, Vol. 4, no. 15 (November 2000), 2.

⁸² Daviti Mtchedlishvili, “Theorising Europeanisation in European Literature: Conceptualisation and Operationalisation,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of European Studies* 10, no. 1 (2018): 80, https://cesaa.org.au/anzjes_issue/

⁸³ Mtchedlishvili, 80.

⁸⁴ Mtchedlishvili, 81.

⁸⁵ Mtchedlishvili, 87.

⁸⁶ Mtchedlishvili, 80.

⁸⁷ Mtchedlishvili, 80.

and agreements with European institutions that contributed to its democratic and European development, while considering its political identity. Furthermore, as part of its Europeanisation process, it continuously adapted its entire framework, in order to raise its democracy score, limit the foreign influence and improve the interplay between the state and society for a uniform state.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, European integration refers to the moment when all these principles of a functional state are achieved and the state starts transposing the EU norms and policies into the national legislation in order to comply with the Copenhagen criteria.⁸⁹ Therefore, Europeanisation is used in this thesis with the meaning that the Republic of Moldova first reconfigures its policies and legislative, executive and judicial mechanisms according to the European standards and then it will adapt and transpose them when the process of European integration will start. Furthermore, Europeanisation is seen as a means of projecting the European soft power in the Republic of Moldova.

In the context of mass-media, Europeanisation refers to assuring freedom of speech, promoting independent journalism, providing access to free, fair and reliable sources of information.⁹⁰ Furthermore, these criteria also represent the operationalisation of the dependent variable. The measurement is done by looking into the national legislation and the European treaties and agreements on media ratified by the Republic of Moldova until 2022, as well as the evolution of European media legislation until 2022. Using document analysis, the thesis looks into the implementation of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), the Television without Frontiers Directive, the AV Media Services Directive, the AV Code, the European Convention on Transfrontier Television (ECTT), ENP, the 2014 Association Agreement and the Action Plans of the Council of Europe implemented in the Republic of Moldova.

The empirical analysis uses additional sources, such as country reports of nonpartisan Moldovan and international organisations, Moldovan official communiques and Moldovan news websites in Romanian and Russian. They are relevant in the context of the various regulations adopted by the Moldovan governments between 2017-2022. Thus, they emphasise which governments adopted regulations that supported pro-Russian and pro-European narratives, respectively. At the same time, they outline the connection between foreign influence and the evolution of the Europeanisation process.

⁸⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova.

⁸⁹ Mtchedlishvili, 84.

⁹⁰ TFEU, 2012/C 326/01, October 26, 2012.

However, it is important to address this connection also from the perspective of foreign policy analysis. In this sense, the link between media influence, public opinion and foreign policy making brings two models used for the study of state power and influence rates: the elite and pluralist models.⁹¹ The elite model consists in elite groups that hold the power to influence the public opinion using media as their means of gaining support.⁹² The pluralist model supports the actions of independent media that limit the power of the government by encouraging the pluralism of opinions and preventing the domination of a single narrative.⁹³

Both models represent a form of soft power, but each of them had a different outcome over the society. For example, the pro-Russian narratives monopolised the televised media in the Republic of Moldova during President Dodon. The TV channels had more transmissions in Russian than in the national language and only some politicians were invited to debate on TV, which is against EU's media freedom regulations. Opposingly, President Sandu modified the Moldovan media policy and introduced mechanisms that improved the independency of mass-media and freedom of speech, in order to comply with EU's requirements. For this reason, the thesis argues the necessity to investigate the foreign (Russian) influence of (Moldovan) mass-media and the Europeanisation process from the perspective of these two models, as presented in the next chapter.

The thesis engages with the above-mentioned variety of indicators, in order to increase the validity of the research. At the same time, the reliability and level of precision are enhanced using a mixed methods approach (using qualitative approach while engaging with the quantification of empirical evidence) and retrieving data from official sources and publications of Moldovan and European institutions, as well as nonpartisan organisations.

However, there must be underlined two observations regarding the surveys on the most popular TV channels and the monitoring reports of the AV Council and the independent media institutions. Even if data were selected from surveys that concerned only the preferences of Moldovans for informative programmes, their answers might be subjective. For example, they might prefer that TV channel also for other types of programmes (i.e. entertainment) and, so, this influences them to choose the same channel for informational purposes. This subjectivity is relevant for the effects of Russian soft power, because it concerns also the cultural and social values of the country. If the audience's preferences for a specific TV channel are based on these criteria, then the foreign influence is succeeding.

⁹¹ Smith, Hadfield and Dunne, 187.

⁹² Smith, Hadfield and Dunne, 187.

⁹³ Smith, Hadfield and Dunne, 187.

The results based on data from the monitoring reports of the AV Council do not include the possible bias of the institution. As pointed out in the empirical analysis, both pro-Russian and pro-European political actors and owners of the TV channels criticised the monitoring activity of the AV Council in several periods. Therefore, they questioned whether the institution was impartial in giving the sanctions to the channels and challenged the 2020 the annual reports. For this reason, it is important to mention that this thesis does not investigate the accuracy of the reports and the given sanctions. They are used as official data, issued by the official public authority that monitors the AV services.

Furthermore, the methodology used in this thesis is suitable for any research project that investigates the phenomenon of foreign influence. On the one hand, it can contribute to in-depth analyses about the Moldovan Europeanisation process, but with a focus on different sectors, such as the foreign influence on the economic frauds or restricting the power of the judiciary. On the other hand, it may be applied in the analysis of the media sector of other post-soviet states that are currently developing their prospects of Europeanisation and their independence from the Russian sphere of influence. Consequently, the findings add to the literature on Russian soft power after 2017, the evolution of the media sector in the Republic of Moldova and the Moldovan Europeanisation process.

3. Case study – The Republic of Moldova

3.1 Political context 2017-2022

In order to understand the political affiliation of each TV channel, this subchapter presents the case background, outlining the timeline of the major political events in the Republic of Moldova between 2017-2022. This political context includes the profile of the main political actors, who were related to the analysed TV channels and who were active in Moldovan politics between 2017-2022. Furthermore, their activity is relevant for the categorisation of the content of each TV channel as pro-Russian or pro-European.

Between 2017-2022, the Republic of Moldova had two presidents: President Dodon (2016-2020) and President Sandu (2020-present). The former was a member of PSRM, who claimed that he would follow a neutral foreign policy, but emphasized the need to re-strengthen the Moldovan-Russian relations and keep the Russian Federation as a strategic partner.⁹⁴ The latter was a member of PAS and declared that the country must have a pro-European orientation.⁹⁵

Between 2016-2019, PDM held the majority in the parliament, followed by PSRM.⁹⁶ It is important to mention, that the parliament together with the (PDM-led) government declared that, during their term, the partnership for European integration will be a national priority.⁹⁷ At the same time, in 2019, before the end of the PDM government, the Prime-Minister declared that there were many accomplishments in strengthening the relations with Ukraine and Romania, while the “accession to the European Union and the Association Agreement remain the compass according to which we orient and harmonize all actions.”⁹⁸ Thus, most of the political initiatives in the Republic of Moldova during the presidency of Mr. Dodon, were coordinated by PDM, led by Mr. Vladimir Plahotniuc.

⁹⁴ The Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, “The investiture speech of Mr. Igor Dodon as President of the Republic of Moldova,” December 23, 2016, <https://www.presedinte.md/rom/comunicate-de-presa/discursul-de-investitura-al-domnului-igor-dodon-in-functia-de-presedinte-al-republicii-moldova>

⁹⁵ Robin Emmott, “Exclusive Moldovan president to Russia: joining the EU is our choice,” *Reuters*, Brussels, December 14, 2021, accessed March 26, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/exclusive-moldovan-president-russia-joining-eu-is-our-choice-2021-12-14/>

⁹⁶ Alegeri.md, “The Parliament of the Republic of Moldova for the 2014–2018 legislature,” [in Romanian], accessed March 23, 2023, https://alegeri.md/w/Parlamentul_Republicii_Moldova_de_legislatura_2014%E2%80%932018#Componen.C8.9Ba_final.C4.83

⁹⁷ Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, “Decision on the approval of the Declaration of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova regarding the National Partnership in the field of European integration” [in Romanian], Decision no. 218, July 29, 2016.

⁹⁸ Alegeri.md, “The Government of Pavel Filip,” [in Romanian], accessed March 23, 2023, https://alegeri.md/w/Guvernul_Pavel_Filip

PDM is a centre-left party that supports the independence and the European integration of the Republic of Moldova, as well as strengthening the international cooperation “especially with the Commonwealth of Independent States and the neighbouring countries.”⁹⁹ Mr. Plahotniuc is a businessman, oligarch and politician, who became the First Deputy Speaker of the Parliament between 2010-2013 and the president of PDM between 2016-2019.¹⁰⁰ He owns multiple TV channels and was involved in several actions of corruption, as presented in the next subchapter.

In the parliamentary elections from February 2019, PAS united with the Dignity and Truth Platform Party (PPDA) in the centre-right electoral bloc ACUM (NOW in English), led by Ms. Sandu. Between 2019-2021, PSRM, PDM and ACUM occupied most of the places in the parliament. Since no party gained an absolute majority after the parliamentary elections, the politicians had three months to form a coalition that could designate the new government.¹⁰¹ PSRM (previously led by President Dodon) and the ACUM bloc (led by Ms. Sandu) reached a “temporary political agreement for the de-oligarchizing of Moldova”¹⁰² and appointed Ms. Sandu from ACUM bloc as the new Prime-Minister and a member of PSRM as the new speaker of the Parliament.¹⁰³ The Constitutional Court, through the request of PDM, led by Mr. Plahotniuc, declared these actions unconstitutional, because they surpassed the constitutional deadline to designate a government.¹⁰⁴ Consequently, de facto, the parliament was dissolved and President Dodon was temporarily suspended, while a PDM member was “appointed” as an interim president until new elections.¹⁰⁵

After political protests and debates regarding the influence of Mr. Plahotniuc over the judicial system and his acts of corruption, he left the country and the members of the Constitutional Court resigned, thus, formally ending the dismissal of President Dodon and

⁹⁹ The Democratic Party of Moldova, “Statute,” [in Romanian], accessed March 23, 2023, <http://www.pdm.md/ro/pdm/statut>

¹⁰⁰ The Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, “Members of the Parliament,” accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.parlament.md/StructuraParlamentului/Deputa%C8%9Bii/tabid/87/Id/317/language/en-US/Default.aspx>

¹⁰¹ Council of Europe: Parliamentary Assembly, “The functioning of democratic institutions in the Republic of Moldova”, Resolution 2308 (2019), October, 3, 2019.

¹⁰² Council of Europe: Parliamentary Assembly, Resolution 2308 (2019).

¹⁰³ Nicoleta Braghiș, “June 8, 2019: What happened the day PSRM and the ACUM Bloc signed the Agreement that removed the Plahotniuc regime from government” [in Romanian], June 8, 2020, accessed February 2, 2023, <https://www.zdg.md/importante/8-iunie-2019-ce-s-a-intamplat-in-ziua-in-care-psrm-si-acum-au-semnat-acord-de-intelegere/>

¹⁰⁴ Matthias Williams, “<<Moldova is free>> cheers new premier as rival steps aside,” Reuters, June 24, 2019, accessed April 3, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-moldova-politics/moldovas-democratic-party-dissolves-government-to-end-crisis-idUSKCN1TF20B?il=0>

¹⁰⁵ Williams.

recognising the newly formed government led by Ms. Sandu.¹⁰⁶ The resignation of oligarchs was saluted by both the Russian Federation and the EU, which supported the success of “President Dodon and his current coalition partners”¹⁰⁷ and the “democratically elected representatives,”¹⁰⁸ respectively.

The presidency of Mr. Dodon was also influential during this period. Since June 2019, he became more active in political declarations, most of them criticising the government of Ms. Sandu, which was eventually dismissed through a motion of censure from PSRM and PDM in November 2019.¹⁰⁹ Even if PSRM was initially in the opposition of the PDM government, since 2019 they began a collaboration, which mostly aimed blocking the initiatives and weaken the electorate of PAS and Ms. Sandu. In November 2019, President Dodon appointed one of his counsellors as the new Prime-Minister, who formed a government with members of both PSRM and PDM.¹¹⁰ Then, in 2020, PDM and PSRM created a parliamentary majority.¹¹¹ Their collaboration supported a balanced foreign policy, which aimed at strengthening the role of the state in both its Association Agreement with the EU and as a member of CIS.¹¹²

After President Sandu was elected at the end of 2020, the prime-minister stepped-down, causing the entire government to resign.¹¹³ After unsuccessful debates with the parliament, which did not accept the new proposals for a prime-minister, President Sandu dissolved it and organised snap elections for June 2021.¹¹⁴ In the parliamentary elections from 2021, PSRM and the Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) united in the left-wing electoral Bloc of Communists and Socialists (BCS). The first two candidates on their list were the former

¹⁰⁶ Council of Europe: Parliamentary Assembly, Resolution 2308 (2019).

¹⁰⁷ The Moscow Times, “Putin Vows to Back Moldovan President in Fight Against <<Usurpers>>,” June 13, 2019, accessed December 18, 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/06/13/putin-vows-to-back-moldovan-president-fight-against-usurpers-a65977>

¹⁰⁸ European Union External Action, “Statement by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini and Commissioner Johannes Hahn on the political situation in the Republic of Moldova,” The Diplomatic Service of the European Union, Brussels, June 9, 2019.

¹⁰⁹ Simion Ciochină, “Republic of Moldova: Retrospective of the 2019 political year” [in Romanian], DW, December 20, 2019, accessed December 18, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/ro/republica-moldova-retrospectiva-anului-politic-2019/a-51753685>

¹¹⁰ Vitalie Călugăreanu, “Russia fainted the pro-European party in the Republic of Moldova” [in Romanian], DW, November 14, 2019, accessed December 19, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/ro/rusia-a-fentat-partida-pro-european%C4%83-din-republica-moldova-pericol-de-federalizare/a-51253090>

¹¹¹ Alegeri.md, “The Social-Democratic Platform for Moldova,” [in Romanian], accessed March 23, 2023, https://alegeri.md/w/Platforma_Social-Democrat%C4%83_pentru_Moldova

¹¹² Alegeri.md, “The Social-Democratic Platform for Moldova.”

¹¹³ The Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, “The speech of the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, during the Constitutional Court session examining the referral regarding the ascertainment of the circumstances justifying the dissolution of the Parliament” [in Romanian], April 15, 2021, <https://www.presedinte.md/eng/discursuri/discursul-presedintelui-republicii-moldova-maia-sandu-in-cadrul-sedintei-curtii-constitutionale-de-examinare-a-sesizarii-privind-constatarea-circumstantelor-care-justifica-dizolvarea-parlamentului>

¹¹⁴ The Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, April 15, 2021.

Presidents Voronin and Dodon.¹¹⁵ The new parliamentary majority formed after July 2021, as well as the new government, were constituted of PAS members, while BCS and Șor Party (PPȘ) were part of the opposition.¹¹⁶

PPȘ is a populist party, which gained seats in the parliament for the first time in 2021 and opposes the ACUM block through public protests.¹¹⁷ The party is led by Mr. Ilan Șor, an oligarch accused of fraud, breach of trust and money laundering, being the principal suspect in the 2014 bank fraud.¹¹⁸ Even if his case was still under the investigation of the authorities, he left the country in 2019.¹¹⁹ In 2022, PPȘ was accused of receiving funds for the party and for organising protests against the government from a criminal organisation.¹²⁰

Another important investigation that started in 2022 involved former President Dodon and Mr. Plahotniuc. The former president was accused of corruption and treason for receiving funds for PSRM from Mr. Plahotniuc in 2019.¹²¹ Mr. Plahotniuc was leading a criminal organisation aiming to control the judiciary in the Republic of Moldova and asked the former president to protect him from criminal liabilities in the Russian Federation.¹²² The former president pleaded as not guilty and declared that the investigation was reinforced by political reasons.¹²³ Mr. Furculiță, PSRM member and owner of the TV channel “NTV Moldova,” was also accused of being involved in this action.¹²⁴ Furthermore, in 2022, the US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control sanctioned Mr. Șor and Mr. Plahotniuc for collaborating with the Russian government on undermining President Sandu and for being

¹¹⁵ The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova, “The electoral bloc of the Communists and Socialists” [in Romanian], May 22, 2021, https://a.cec.md/en/blocul-electoral-al-comunistilor-si-socialistilor-8572_99433.html

¹¹⁶ Alegeri.md, “The Parliament of the Republic of Moldova – the 11th legislature” [in Romanian], accessed March 23, 2023, https://alegeri.md/w/Parlamentul_Republicii_Moldova_de_legislatura_a_XI-a

¹¹⁷ Alegeri.md, “Șor Party” [in Romanian], accessed March 24, 2023, https://alegeri.md/w/Partidul_%E2%80%9C%C8%98or%E2%80%9D

¹¹⁸ Alegeri.md, “Șor Party.”

¹¹⁹ IPN, “Ilan Șor has a criminal record for allegedly leaving the country even though he was forbidden to do so” [in Romanian], July 4, 2019, accessed March 25, 2023, https://www.ipn.md/ro/ilan-sor-are-dosar-penal-pentru-ca-ar-fi-7965_1066600.html

¹²⁰ Veronica Fetco, “20 black bags, with approximately 3.5 million lei, were seized during the searches carried out on the members of the ȘOR Party, announces the head of the anti-corruption prosecutor's office” [in Romanian], Ziarul de Gardă, October 20, 2022, accessed April 10, 2023, <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-justitie/20-de-pungi-negre-cu-aproximativ-35-milioane-de-lei-au-fost-ridicate-in-timpul-perchezitiilor-efectuate-la-membrii-partidului-sor-anunta-sefa-de-la-pa/>

¹²¹ ZdG Editorial, “Ex-president Igor Dodon, released from house arrest” [in Romanian], Ziarul de Gardă, November 18, 2022, accessed April 10, 2023, <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-justitie/video-ex-presedintele-igor-dodon-eliberat-din-arest-la-domiciliu/>

¹²² ZdG Editorial, “Ex-president Igor Dodon, released from house arrest.”

¹²³ ZdG Editorial, “Ex-president Igor Dodon, released from house arrest.”

¹²⁴ Milena Onisim, “Zinaida Greceanii and Corneliu Furculiță are accused in the case regarding the illegal financing of the PSRM” [in Romanian], Ziarul de Gardă, October 31, 2022, accessed April 10, 2023, <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-justitie/zinaida-greceanii-si-corneliu-furculita-au-statut-de-invinuiti-in-dosarul-privind-finantarea-ilegala-a-psrm/>

involved in acts of corruption, respectively.¹²⁵ This international investigation affected also the national legislation of mass-media, as outlined in the third subchapter.

Therefore, the timeline of events showed that the members of PDM and PSRM worked on strengthening their influential positions and controlling the judicial system, as well as the state institutions. For this reason, after President Sandu won the elections, the corruption and the institutional deadlock were still under the control of the previous political class. However, the investigations from 2022 brought more evidence about the political actors involved in the actions of keeping the Republic of Moldova under the Russian sphere of influence. The short-lived PAS government from 2019 proved the common interests and collaboration between PSRM and PDM, one of them being to weaken the electorate of pro-European PAS. However, it is relevant to mention that throughout the entire presidency of Dodon, the state continued to reiterate its commitments to Europe. Therefore, they kept an open collaboration with both the East and the West, even if it was unbalanced.

For this reason, the main findings of this section are the PSRM, PDM and PPŞ members' support for pro-Russian policies and opposition towards the pro-European PAS and PPDA members. The next subchapter evaluates how these influential actors were involved in the pro-Russian TV channels, in order to highlight which political party or actor received Russian support. Then, the third subchapter analyses the legal developments in the mass-media and AV sector during each government. The purpose is to conclude the periods when Russian influence was higher, the measures took by the political actors and the civil society to combat it and how they affected the Europeanisation process.

3.2 Analysis of the most popular news TV channels

Considering the aim of the thesis, this subchapter investigates the most popular TV broadcasters for news between 2017 and 2022 in the Republic of Moldova. According to the methodology of the thesis, the channels are presented in terms of ownership, language, origin of content and political content style. Even if the analysis is based on data from the period 2017-2022, most of the information is presented as a comparison between data from 2017 and 2021, because these represent the first complete years of presidency of Mr. Dodon and Ms. Sandu and are relevant to compare the changes in the mass-media sector that happened during their terms.

¹²⁵ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Corruption and the Kremlin's Malign Influence Operations in Moldova," October 26, 2022, accessed April 10, 2023, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1049>

The results of three official surveys from 2017 showed that the most popular Moldovan TV channels were: Prime TV, Jurnal TV, Moldova 1, RTR Moldova, ProTV Chişinău, NTV Moldova, Canal 2, Canal 3 and Publika TV.¹²⁶ Whereas the results of three official surveys from 2021 showed almost the same order of preferences, the only difference that needs to be pointed out is the increased popularity of the TV channels TV8 and Primul în Moldova.¹²⁷

Therefore, in the comparison between the Moldovan audience's preferences for news TV channels in 2017 and 2021, the top of the most popular channels remained almost the same. Even if there were noticed changes in the order of TV channels' preferences, the surveys showed tight results. Accordingly, the percentages varied depending on the month of the year and the interviewed audience. The most accurate finding from this comparison is that all surveys from both 2017 and 2021 outlined the same TV channels in top 3: Prime TV, Moldova 1 and Jurnal TV. Consequently, they are the most important source of information for the Moldovan audience.

In order to realise the categorisation of the TV channels, the chapter starts by explaining the role of the AV Council in monitoring the activity and the content of all the TV channels in respect to the AV Code. The AV Code is the main legislative act for all the AV services, which is analysed in the next subchapter together with other Moldovan and European media policies and legislative acts. However, it is significant to mention that the AV Code was changed multiple times between 2017-2022 and, thus, the regulations regarding the functioning of the AV Council and the AV services were also changed throughout this period. In order to conduct a precise analysis, all the remarks about the content of the TV channels are presented in accordance with the version of the AV Code from that respective period.

The AV Council is an autonomous public authority that plays a consultative role regarding the normative acts and the international negotiations in the AV field and is "responsible for the implementation of international conventions and treaties in the AV field to which the Republic of Moldova is a party."¹²⁸ The activity of the AV Council relevant for the purpose of this thesis refers to its role of "ensuring a pluralistic and objective information of the population"¹²⁹ and its regular reports about the AV services. The reports, also used in this research, include details about the monitoring activity and the sanctions for all the TV channels that go against the AV Code and have to be approved by the parliament in order to

¹²⁶ See Appendix A.

¹²⁷ See Appendix B.

¹²⁸ Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, The AV Code [in Romanian], Code no. 174, Article 74 (5), November 8, 2018.

¹²⁹ Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Code no. 174, Article 73 (2).

become official. Significantly, the members of the AV Council were appointed only by the parliament until 2018.¹³⁰ Since the new AV Code was adopted in 2019, the members are appointed by the parliament, government, president and the civil society organisations.¹³¹ However, the members cannot be politically affiliated, nor can the institution itself represent the interests of the authorities.¹³²

To begin with the in-depth analysis of the TV channels, it is relevant to mention that the research focuses on the political affiliation of the owners, the language and origin of content and the types of narratives furthered in the political programmes. A significant part of the research problem is addressed through the connection between the owners and the narratives furthered by the channel. In order to facilitate the understanding of the analysis, the main empirical findings are highlighted in tables, which systematise the TV channels related to Mr. Plahotniuc, the ones that further pro-Russian narratives and the ones that further both pro-European and neutral narratives. Furthermore, the indicator “political content style” is divided in two separate columns, in order to emphasise if and how the political narratives of the channel changed from 2017 to 2022.

Table 1. The categorisation of the TV channels related to Mr. Plahotniuc.

Name of the TV channel	Owner	Language	Origin of content	Political content style in 2017	Political content style in 2022
Prime TV	Administrator: Petru Jelihovschi Licence holder: “General Media Group CORP” Beneficial owner: Vladimir Plahotniuc	Romanian and Russian	Original and from Russian producers	Pro-Russian	Neutral/ Pro-Russian
Publika TV	Administrator: Petru Jelihovschi Licence holder: “General Media Group CORP” Beneficial owner: Vladimir Plahotniuc	Romanian and Russian	Original and from Russian creators	Pro-Russian	Neutral/ Pro-Russian

¹³⁰ Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, The AV Code, Code no. 260-XVI, Article 42, July 27, 2006.

¹³¹ Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Code no. 174, Article 76.

¹³² Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Code no. 174, Article 74&76.

Canal 2	2017: Administrator: Lilian Buștiuc Licence holder: “Telestar Media” SRL Beneficial owner: Oleg Cristal Since 2020: Beneficial owner: Lilian Buștiuc	Romanian and Russian	Original and affiliated with GMG Productions	Neutral/ Pro-Russian	Neutral/ Pro-Russian
Canal 3	2017: Administrator: Lilian Buștiuc Licence holder: “Telestar Media” SRL Beneficial owner: Oleg Cristal 2021: Beneficial owner: Lilian Buștiuc	Romanian and Russian	Original and affiliated with GMG Productions	Neutral/ Pro-Russian	Neutral/ Pro-Russian

As illustrated in Table 1, Mr. Plahotniuc was the beneficial owner of the company “General Media Group CORP” that held the licence for Prime TV, Publika TV, Canal 2 and Canal 3 in 2017.¹³³ In the same year, new changes in the AV Code interdicted the ownership of more than two licences per one entity.¹³⁴ Therefore, the licences for “Canal 2” and “Canal 3” were transferred to the company “Telestar Media,” owned by the counsellor of Mr. Plahotniuc, Mr. Oleg Cristal, and, since 2020, it is owned by the non-politically affiliated Mr. Lilian Buștiuc.¹³⁵ Besides, the AV Code stipulates that each TV channel must publish on their website the annual reports that include the name of the owner and information about the broadcasted content.¹³⁶ None of the channels published these reports until 2022, claiming they will make changes on their websites.¹³⁷ Furthermore, in 2022, the contact details from the

¹³³ RISE Moldova, “Connections – General Media Group Corp” [in Romanian], accessed November 12, 2022, <https://www.rise.md/firma/general-media-group-corp/>

¹³⁴ Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Code 260-XVI, Article 66 (3).

¹³⁵ The AV Council, “Decision regarding the examination of some cession requests,” Decision 9/65, May 12. 2017 and Ion Preașca, “Two TV channels from Plahotniuc’s holding are in insolvency,” RISE Moldova, October 20, 2022, accessed December 4, 2022, <https://www.rise.md/doua-televiziuni-din-holdingul-lui-plahotniuc-in-insolvabilitate/>

¹³⁶ Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Code no. 174 Article 13&28.

¹³⁷ AV Council, June 2022, 9.

websites of “Canal 2” and “Canal 3” still indicated the company “General Media Group CORP,” even if they changed the owner in 2020. Mr. Lilian Buștiuc admitted that they are two separate companies, but they have the same headquarters and collaborate in producing the content for their TV channels.¹³⁸ This claim is reinforced by the following analysis of the common sanctions received by the four channels between 2017-2022.

In this period, they received together 27 public notices and 31 sanctions for not complying with the amount of locally produced content, the amount of content in Romanian language and with ensuring an impartial reflection of the political events. Since these four channels produced content together, they received the same penalties in most of the cases. Regarding the politically biased content, between 2017-2019 they all broadcasted information in favour of the initiatives and members of PDM, several times in favour of PSRM and an independent candidate, as well as against the actions and members of PPDA.¹³⁹ The members of PPDA, led by Ms. Sandu, filed multiple complaints to the AV Council, mentioning more examples of news where the members of PPDA were not presented in an objective manner and influenced the public opinion, but the AV Council did not consider any transgression from the AV Code and did not sanction the channels.¹⁴⁰ Supported by the TV channel “Jurnal TV”, the members of PPDA claimed that the AV Council was controlled by Mr. Plahotniuc and his government, which did not comply to the law and was protecting these four channels from more sanctions.¹⁴¹ These accusations were subsequently denied by the AV Council.¹⁴²

Between 2020-2021, the news programmes of “Prime TV” and “Canal 2” shifted their political narrative, as they presented more facts that supported the candidates from PPS and

¹³⁸ Natalia Zaharescu, “Television masters: What (hasn't) changed three years after Plahotniuc and Șor left the Republic of Moldova” [in Romanian], Ziarul de Gardă, May 12, 2022, accessed November 18, 2022, <https://www.zdg.md/investigatii/ancheta/video-stapanii-televiziei-ce-nu-s-a-schimbata-la-trei-ani-dupa-ce-plahotniuc-si-sor-au-plecat-din-r-moldova/>

¹³⁹ Petru Macovei et al., “Capturing mass-media and other means of public communication in the Republic of Moldova” [in Romanian], API, Chișinău: 2017, 27 and CJI “Monitoring of the mass media in the electoral campaign for the local elections from May 20, 2018” [in Romanian], Report no. 4, May 12-19, 2018, 22 and Monitoring of the mass media in the electoral campaign for the parliamentary elections 2019” [in Romanian], Report no. 2, January 25-31, 2019, 24.

¹⁴⁰ AV Council, “Decision regarding the examination of the notification of Mr. Andrei Năstase, the leader of the Dignity and Truth Platform Political Party, f/nr. from 29.05.2017” [in Romanian], Decision 17/112, July 21, 2017 and AV Council, “Decision regarding the examination of the notification of Mrs. Aliona Mandatîi, f/no. from 11.07.2017” [in Romanian], Decision 23/152, September 27, 2017.

¹⁴¹ President Maia Sandu, “Posts,” Facebook, September 6, 2017, accessed April 2, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/maia.sandu/posts/662033847338571/>

¹⁴² Jurnal.md, “The TV stations controlled by Plahotniuc escape sanctions: the CCA decided to take note of the reports of the leaders of the extra-parliamentary opposition, but without taking any other actions” [in Romanian], September 27, 2017, accessed February 25, 2023, <https://www.jurnal.md/ro/politic/2017/9/27/posturile-tv-controlate-de-plahotniuc-scapa-de-sanctiuni-cca-a-decis-sa-ia-act-de-sesizarile-liderilor-opozitiei-extraparlamentare-dar-fara-a-intreprinde-alte-actiuni/>

BCS.¹⁴³ None of the programmes respected political pluralism and balanced information, because they did not include the opinion of the other party that was involved in the event. Between 2021-2022 the channels did not receive any sanctions for their political content, but the monitoring reports showed that, in 2021, “Prime TV” and “Publika TV” shared positive news about PPS and BCS.¹⁴⁴ In this particular case, it is relevant to mention that the moderators of the programmes did not influence the narrative and the categorisation of positive/neutral/negative manner was done in accordance with the events related to that specific political party or candidate, not the language used.¹⁴⁵

However, between 2021-2022, all four channels received a significant number of penalties for violating the norm regarding the total of programmes that have to be realised locally and in the Romanian language.¹⁴⁶ This observation is relevant for the research because the TV channels shared more Russian content than it was allowed, which goes against the national legislation and shows the effects of Russian soft power in Moldovan mass-media.

Significantly, in 2017 and 2018 “Prime TV” re-broadcasted a lot of news content from the Russian channel “Pervyi Kanal” that showed unbalanced narratives against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), USA and EU, while supporting the Russian Federation, as well as transmitting one of President Putin’s speeches about the Russian military capabilities.¹⁴⁷ In both cases the channel was sanctioned because it had less content in the Romanian language than required and because the AV Code stipulated that informative programmes can be re-broadcasted only if they are produced in EU, USA, Canada or the contracting parties of ECTT, an act signed but not ratified by the Russian Federation.¹⁴⁸

Therefore, even if their owner changed in 2020, the channels “Prime TV”, “Publika TV”, “Canal 2” and “Canal 3” had similar content throughout the whole period of analysis, which violated the regulations concerning political pluralism, predominant content produced locally and in the national language, as well as the transparency regarding their owners and their annual activity. Importantly, only “Prime TV” was sanctioned for re-broadcasting

¹⁴³ AV Council, “Report on the Activity of AV Council in the Year 2020” [in Romanian], (Chişinău, February 24, 2021), 81-85 and CJI, The Civic Coalition for Free and Fair Elections, “Monitoring of the mass media in the electoral campaign for the parliamentary elections anticipated from July 11, 2021” [in Romanian], Report no. 4, June 25-July 1, 2021, 11.

¹⁴⁴ CJI and The Civic Coalition for Free and Fair Elections, 19.

¹⁴⁵ CJI and The Civic Coalition for Free and Fair Elections, 19.

¹⁴⁶ AV Council, “The Activity of AV Council in the Year 2021” [in Romanian], (Chişinău, February 23, 2022), 104 and “Annual Activity Report 2022 -Appendix 1” [in Romanian], 29-31.

¹⁴⁷ API, “Final monitoring report of the TV channels from the Russian Federation re-broadcasted in the Republic of Moldova” [in Romanian], March 27 2017- April 26 2017, 5 and AV Council, “Report regarding the Activity of AV Council in the Year 2018” [in Romanian], (Chişinău, February 28, 2019), 132.

¹⁴⁸ AV Council, “Report regarding the Activity of AV Council in the Year 2018,” 132-133.

informative content directly from a Russian TV channel, while the other channels were mostly transmitting cultural or social programmes from Russian producers, proving the presence of Russian soft power in Moldovan mass-media. At the same time, all the news programmes supported the local pro-Russian narratives. Until 2019, it was noticed a clear support for the ruling politicians and parties, namely Mr. Plahotniuc (the owner of the channels), President Dodon, PDM and PSRM, respectively. Furthermore, the channels broadcasted significant negative and controversial information about Ms. Sandu and ACUM bloc, which were in the opposition until 2020. Another important mention is that the news programmes supported PPŞ and BCS after Mr. Plahotniuc left the country and PDM did not obtain parliamentary majority in 2019. These narratives reinforce the timeline of events from the previous subchapter, which presented that even if PDM and PSRM did not share the same political views, they collaborated many times for weakening the electorate of Ms. Sandu.

The empirical evidence proved that the channels supported Russian-backed politicians mostly from PDM, but also from PSRM and PPŞ. At the same time, they furthered narratives that criticised PAS and PPDA members. In connection to the Russian influence, the TV channels broadcasted a significant amount of content from Russian producers, including news that were directly supporting President Putin and his government. Considering all the empirical evidence of the owners, content and sanctions, the channels “Prime TV” and “Publika TV” could be categorized as having a noticeable pro-Russian media stance until 2019 and more neutral narratives since 2020. The content of the channels “Canal 2” and “Canal 3” furthered proportionally pro-Russian and neutral narratives between 2017-2022.

Significantly, the electorate of the pro-Russian parties was strengthened through the content of these TV channels. This emphasises two interconnected outcomes, useful for answering the research question. Firstly, the public opinion was influenced to support the parties that were backed by the Russian Federation. The direct involvement of Mr. Plahotniuc in managing the content of these TV channels was directly noticed after his leaving in 2019, when the political content became rather neutral. At the same time, it was pointed out that the PDM government influenced the AV Council, in order to keep broadcasting biased content. Secondly, the more these parties had public support, the longer they controlled the institutional frameworks, were involved in corruption acts and slowed down the Europeanisation process.

Table 2. The categorisation of the TV channels with a pro-Russian narrative.

Name of the TV channel	Owner	Language	Origin of content	Political content style in 2017	Political content style in 2022
Primul în Moldova	2019-2020: Administrator: Vîjga Stanislav Licence holder: “Telesistem TV” SRL Beneficial owners: Chaika Igor and Ciubara Vadim 2021: Beneficial owners: Grigoryan Samvel and Ermilova Natalia 2022: Administrator: Corșicova Arina Beneficial owner: Polunin Alexei	Romanian and Russian	Original content and from contracting parties to ECTT and from Russian creators Original 40% EU 30% Russian 30%	No content (it did not exist)	Pro-Russian
RTR Moldova	Director: Sergehev Evghenii Licence holder: “TV-Comunicații Grup” SRL Beneficial owners: Rosmediacom (50%), Valentina Stețco (25%), SB Group Media SRL (25%- Oxana Borșevici and Galina Sîrbu)	Romanian and Russian	Original and from Russian creators	Pro-Russian	Pro-Russian
NTV Moldova	2017: Administrator: Petru Burduja Licence holder: “Exclusiv Media” SRL Beneficial owner: Petru Burduja Since 2020: Administrator: Ludmila Furculiță Beneficial owner: Corneliu Furculiță	Romanian and Russian	Original content and from contracting parties to ECTT and from Russian creators	Pro-Russian	Pro-Russian

As shown in Table 2, “Primul în Moldova” is a TV channel founded in 2019, whose licence holder remained the same until 2022: “Telesistem TV.”¹⁴⁹ This company is based in the Republic of Moldova, but it is owned by other two Russian companies, whose beneficial owners changed until 2022. Thus, the initial owners and shareholders of “Telesistem TV” were Mr. Igor Chaika (Russian citizen) and Mr. Vadim Ciubara (Moldovan citizen), both known for business connections to President Dodon.¹⁵⁰ In 2021, they were changed with two other Russian citizens and in 2022 with another Russian citizen, about whom there are no official political links.¹⁵¹

The initial administrator of the channel “Primul în Moldova” was a Moldovan not known for political involvement, who was changed in 2022 with Ms. Arina Corșicova.¹⁵² She is known for being one of the sponsors of the 2015 political campaign of Mr. Șor and a shareholder of one of the banks involved in the 2014 bank fraud.¹⁵³ Therefore, the channel was linked to both PSRM and PPȘ.

The channel mostly re-broadcasted the content of the Russian TV channel “Pervyi Kanal.” Thus, it can be noticed a connection with the channel “Prime TV,” which, as previously mentioned, re-broadcasted content from the same source until 2019. However, the two channels have no official connection in their ownership. Furthermore, in contrast to “Prime TV,” this channel respected the principle of transparency and has all the annual reports published on its website.¹⁵⁴

Between 2020-2022, the channel „Primul în Moldova” received 8 public notices and 17 fines, related to the origin and language of the content and the manner in which the news was presented.¹⁵⁵ Thus, the majority of programmes was created by Russian producers in the Russian language, usually re-broadcasted from “Pervyi Kanal.” Therefore, the news was

¹⁴⁹ Arina Corșicova, “Declaration on own responsibility regarding the insurance of the transparency of the ownership of the media service provider – Appendix 5” [in Romanian], Moldova: November 4, 2022.

¹⁵⁰ Vijga Stanislav, “Annual Report of Private Media Service Providers – Appendix 1” [in Romanian], January 31, 2020 and WatchDog.MD Community, “Moldova,” in *Disinformation Resilience Index in Central and Eastern Europe in 2021*, ed. Pavel Havlíček and Andrei Yeliseyev (Warsaw: East Center, 2021), 161 and Timpul.md, “Information Security? Accent TV and Primul in Moldova, affiliated with Șor, have a new owner from Russia” [in Romanian], November 5, 2022, accessed January 14, 2023, <https://timpul.md/articol/securitate-informationala-accent-tv-si-primul-in-moldova-afiliate-lui-sor-au-un-nou-proprietar-din-rusia.html>

¹⁵¹ Stanislav and Corșicova.

¹⁵² Corșicova.

¹⁵³ Natalia Zaharescu, “A Russian citizen, the new owner of Primul in Moldova and Accent TV, affiliated, from this fall, to Ilan Șor” [in Romanian], Ziarul de Gardă, November 4, 2022, accessed January 14, 2023, <https://www.zdg.md/importante/un-cetatean-rus-noul-proprietar-la-primul-in-moldova-si-accent-tv-televizioni-afiliate-din-aceasta-toamna-lui-ilan-sor/>

¹⁵⁴ Primul in Moldova, “Contact,” accessed March 3, 2023, <https://primul.md/contact-us>

¹⁵⁵ AV Council, “Annual Activity Report 2022 -Appendix 1”, 25-26 and “The Activity of AV Council in the Year 2021,” 109 and “The Activity of AV Council in the Year 2020,” 139.

favouring Russian narratives and criticised NATO and the EU. In 2022, when the war in Ukraine started, the channel shared much news in the favour of the Russian side, which did not respect the legal provisions on political pluralism or impartiality of facts, influencing the public opinion. However, the AV Council noted that a few days after the war started, the channel stopped broadcasting any political news, proving “prudence and caution.”¹⁵⁶

Regarding the local political content, the news usually portrayed in a positive manner Mr. Dodon and PSRM, but most of the information was criticising President Sandu and PAS, without including their reactions. In 2022, after Ms. Corșicova became the new administrator, the channel broadcasted an interview from Israel with Mr. Șor, who criticised PAS and President Sandu. Significantly, the channel received sanctions in all years for sharing an unbalanced description of political events. Therefore, it can be noted that the general narrative of the channel is pro-Russian with a clear opposition for President Sandu and PAS.

„RTR Moldova” is another channel that has been broadcasting a significant amount of content from Russian producers, especially from the channel “RTR Rossiya” and “Rossiya 1.”¹⁵⁷ Its reports about the transparency of ownership or annual activity were not published on its website, but these data were published by the AV Council and the independent mass-media institutions.¹⁵⁸

Until 2022, the licence of „RTR Moldova” was owned by „TV-Comunicații Grup,” whose shareholders were a Russian NGO, a Moldovan company and a Moldovan citizen, about whom there are no official information regarding their political affiliation.¹⁵⁹ The Russian NGO was founded by two Russian banks and a public Russian AV company.¹⁶⁰ Between 2017 - 2022 the director of “RTR Moldova” was a Moldovan citizen with no official political affiliation.¹⁶¹

Between 2017-2022 the channel received from the AV Council 12 public notices and 25 fines for not ensuring an accurate reporting of political facts and for not broadcasting enough content produced locally and in the national language. Regarding local political narratives, the news programmes between 2017-2020 were mostly in favour of President Dodon, PSRM and

¹⁵⁶ AV Council, “Decision regarding the monitoring results of the television audiovisual media service <<The first in Moldova>>, between February 24-27, 2022” [in Romanian], Decision no. 75, March 22, 2022.

¹⁵⁷ AV Council, “Decision regarding the examination of the request for extension of the broadcasting license issued by <<TV-Comunicații Grup>> SRL for the television station <<RTR Moldova>>” [in Romanian], Decision 25/82, June 19, 2019.

¹⁵⁸ AV Council, “Analysis of the annual reports for 2021 of television media service providers from the Republic of Moldova.”

¹⁵⁹ Sergheev Evghenii, “Declaration on own responsibility regarding the insurance of the transparency of the ownership of the media service provider – Appendix 5” [in Romanian], September 20, 2022.

¹⁶⁰ Zaharescu, “Television masters: What (hasn't) changed three years after Plahotniuc and Șor left the Republic of Moldova.”

¹⁶¹ Evghenii.

PPŞ. Importantly, in 2021, “RTR Moldova” received a public notice because it criticised the activity of Mr. Plahotniuc and the AV Council, which was led at that time by a former PSRM member.¹⁶² Particularly, it declared that the AV Council was externally influenced by Mr. Plahotniuc because it did not carry out an equivalent monitoring activity towards the channels from his media holding, compared to “RTR Moldova” and other channels.¹⁶³ The news did not present the opinion of all the parties involved in the events and, so, transmitted unbalanced information and influenced the public opinion.

Most of the informative programmes that were re-broadcasted from Russian producers shared narratives in favour of the Russian Federation and against the EU, NATO, USA and Ukraine. In this case, the requirement that was mainly violated was the freedom of speech and impartiality. In 2018, the news bulletin of “RTR Moldova” included whole reportages from “Rossiya 1” that even included the comments of the Russian moderator.¹⁶⁴ Importantly, in 2018, the TV channel also had a live transmission of Moscow’s Victory Day Parade.¹⁶⁵ As a result of re-broadcasting these programmes, “RTR Moldova” received sanctions from the AV Council, because the Russian Federation was not a contracting party to the ECTT, nor mentioned in the AV Code as one of the countries from which it was allowed to re-broadcast informative programmes. In 2022, the channel was sanctioned for transmitting biased reports about the war in Ukraine, but it was also noted that several news bulletins did not include any information regarding the war, an action considered as prudent by the AV Council.¹⁶⁶ Another sanction was related to the Russian artistic programmes transmitted without Romanian dubbing or subtitles.¹⁶⁷ Consequently, the channel included so many Russian-produced programmes that it did not meet the minimum amount locally produced programmes in the Romanian language. This transgression exemplifies the Russian soft power present in Moldovan mass-media, because it promotes the Russian culture and language more than the legal norms permit. Consequently, due to its ownership and broadcasted content, “RTR Moldova” is categorised as pro-Russian.

“NTV Moldova” is another channel that re-broadcasts Russian content and is associated with PSRM. Compared to the other channels, its transparency and activity reports are published

¹⁶² AV Council, “The Activity of AV Council in the Year 2021,” 101.

¹⁶³ AV Council, “The Activity of AV Council in the Year 2021,” 101.

¹⁶⁴ AV Council, “Report regarding the Activity of AV Council in the Year 2018”, 65.

¹⁶⁵ AV Council, “Report regarding the Activity of AV Council in the Year 2018”, 64.

¹⁶⁶ AV Council, “Annual Activity Report 2022 - Appendix 1”, 23.

¹⁶⁷ AV Council, “Report regarding the Activity of AV Council in the Year 2021” 101.

on its website.¹⁶⁸ The licence of the channel belongs to the company “Exclusive Media,” whose ownership initially belonged to Mr. Burduja, followed by Mr. Furculiță.¹⁶⁹ Both of them are members of PSRM and BCS. As previously mentioned, Mr. Furculiță was involved in 2022 in a corruption and fraud investigation together with Mr. Dodon and Mr. Plahotniuc.¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, “Exclusive Media” also owns the Moldovan news publication in Russian language “Argumenty i Fakty.”¹⁷¹ Since 2020, the administrator of the channel is the wife of Mr. Furculiță.¹⁷²

Between 2017-2022, the channel received 19 public notices and 25 fines for its political content and the origin and the language of the programmes. Regarding its content related to local politics, the news about the members of PSRM or BCS (and President Dodon) were reflected in a positive manner, while the ones about PPDA or President Sandu in a negative manner.¹⁷³ Furthermore, in 2019, there was noticed content not only against PPDA, but also against PPŞ. It is relevant to mention that the news against PPDA was similar compared to the other TV channels, while the support of PSRM was the highest during the electoral campaigns, both through the quantity and perspective of news about the party.¹⁷⁴ The information did not respect pluralism of opinions, because it did not include the comments of all the parties involved and it presented accusations without a factual background.

Its content from Russian producers includes exaggerated facts and filters the information regarding international politics.¹⁷⁵ Thus, it presents narratives that support the Russian Federation and are against USA, EU and Ukraine.¹⁷⁶ In 2022, it was sanctioned for including in its programme much news from the Russian Federation about the war in Ukraine, sharing an unbalanced view of the events. Similar to the other TV channels, “NTV Moldova”

¹⁶⁸ NTV Moldova, “Kontakty,” accessed December 18, 2022,

<https://www.ntv.md/index.php?do=static&page=contact>

¹⁶⁹ AV Council, “Register of over-the-air TV studios” [in Romanian], December 27, 2016 and Ludmila Furculiță, “Annual Report of Private Media Service Providers” [in Romanian], January 28, 2022.

¹⁷⁰ Milena Onisim, “Zinaida Greceanii and Corneliu Furculiță are accused in the case regarding the illegal financing of the PSRM” [in Romanian], Ziarul de Gardă, October 31, 2022, accessed April 10, 2023, <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-justitie/zinaida-greceanii-si-corneliu-furculita-au-statut-de-invinuiti-in-dosarul-privind-finantarea-ilegala-a-psrm/>

¹⁷¹ Furculiță, 2022.

¹⁷² AV Council, “Register of television media service providers” [in Romanian], September 15, 2020.

¹⁷³ Petru Macovei et al., 20.

¹⁷⁴ The AV Council, “Decision regarding the examination of the Monitoring Report of the main informative bulletins of the television stations “Moldova-1”, “Prime”, “Canal 3”, “RTR Moldova”, “Publika TV”, “TV 8”, “Accent TV”, “Pro TV Chisinau”, “Jurnal TV”, “ITV”, “Ren Moldova” and “NTV Moldova” in the chapter on compliance with electoral legislation” [in Romanian], Decision 29/212, November 30, 2017,

¹⁷⁵ API, “Final monitoring report of the TV channels from the Russian Federation re-broadcasted in the Republic of Moldova,” 7.

¹⁷⁶ API, “Final monitoring report of the TV channels from the Russian Federation re-broadcasted in the Republic of Moldova,” 7.

had several news bulletins in which it did not include information about the war, an action described by the AV Council as being prudent.¹⁷⁷ At the same time, due to the amount of Russian re-broadcasted programmes that were not translated, the channel was also sanctioned for not meeting the required quotas of content produced locally and in the Romanian language. Considering the political affiliation of the owners and the political content of “NTV Moldova,” the channel is considered to further a pro-Russian narrative.

The findings regarding the direct connection of “Primul în Moldova” and “RTR Moldova” to Russian companies and entities are significant for the central argument of the thesis. Significantly, even if the ownership of “NTV Moldova” does not belong directly to Russian entities, the connections are proven by the empirical evidence on the pro-Russian approach of the PSRM members. Considering the origin of both their beneficial owners and funding, the channels represent instruments of Russian soft power, which share positively biased facts about Russian politics, culture and heritage. As a result, they create a favourable environment for Russian influence and increase the pro-Russian electorate. Accordingly, they strengthen the support for governments whose initiatives do not contribute to the Europeanisation process.

Table 3. The categorisation of the TV channels with a pro-European or neutral narrative.

Name of the TV channel	Owner	Language	Origin of content	Political content style in 2017	Political content style in 2022
Jurnal TV	2017: Administrator: Valentin Butnaru Licence holder: “Jurnal de Chişinău Plus” SRL (owned by Rheinstein Media Management Germany GMBH - owned by Victor Țopa) Beneficial owner: Victor Țopa 2019-2022: Licence holder: “Reforma Art” SRL (owned by VB NEWS MEDIA GMBH – owned by Victor Țopa)	Romanian and Russian	Original and from contracting parties to ECTT	Pro-European	Pro-European

¹⁷⁷ AV Council, “Annual Activity Report 2022 -Appendix 1”, 24-26.

	Beneficial owner: Valentin Butnaru				
ProTV Chişinău	Administrator: Traian-Cătălin Giosan Licence holder: “Pro Digital” SRL Beneficial owner: Central European Media Enterprises (since 2020: Petr Kellner and Ladislav Bartonicek - Czech Republic; Jean Pascal Pierre A. Duvieusart -Belgium)	Romanian	Original and from contracting parties to ECTT and other Western creators	Neutral/ Pro-European	Neutral/ Pro-European
TV8	2019-2021: Director: Natalia Morari Since 2021: Director: Svetlana Buza Licence holder: “Media Alternativă” Since 2021: Beneficial owners: Igor Boţan, Mariana Raţă-Vremea, Ciorici Dumitru, Craiţămîndră Viorica, Buza Svetlana Local funding: 55.5% Foreign funding: 44.5% (Western enterprises)	Romanian and Russian (80% and 20%)	Original and from European producers (Contracting parties to ECTT)	No content (it started its activity only at the end of 2017)	Pro-European
Moldova 1	2017: Director: Ecaterina Stratan 2021: Director: Corneliu Durnescu Licence holder: “Teleradio-Moldova” (2015-2021: Director Olga Bordeianu, since 2021: Vlad Țurcanu) Beneficial owners: N/A (it is a public institution)	Romanian and Russian	Original, from contracting parties to ECTT and other foreign companies	Neutral	Neutral

“Jurnal TV” is a channel that does not have any connection to Russian producers, but it is linked to a certain extent to one of the local political parties, PPDA. It has a special heading on its website regarding the transparency of ownership.¹⁷⁸ As shown in Table 3, the channel was initially owned by the company “Jurnal de Chişinău Plus” and then by “Reforma Art,” both of them having Mr. Victor Țopa as the beneficial owner.¹⁷⁹ He is the former Minister of Transport and Communications and he is related to Mr. Andrei Năstase from PPDA.¹⁸⁰ For this reason, most of the information presented at the TV channel “Jurnal TV” is about Mr. Năstase and PPDA, as it can be also noticed in the reports of AV Council and the independent mass-media institutions.

Between 2017-2022, the channel received 7 public notices and 12 fines. The live political debates mostly had guests from PPDA, thus omitting the right of other parties to comment the events. During a talk-show at “Jurnal TV,” the moderator did not intervene to impose a neutral narrative or to testify the information presented by President Sandu, who described in a positive manner PPDA and criticised other third parties.¹⁸¹ Moreover, the news regarding local politics were usually presenting narratives in favour of the members of PPDA and against the independent candidate for the local, parliamentary and presidential elections. As previously mentioned, this candidate was highly promoted by the four channels of “General Media Group CORP.”

In 2022, the channel “Jurnal TV” had informative programmes on the war in Ukraine, which were sanctioned for favouring the Ukrainian side. Several reports showed that the news presented unbalanced views, because they did not include the comments of both Ukrainian and Russian officials.¹⁸² Considering the links between the owners and the political parties, the content and the sanctions received by “Jurnal TV,” its narratives are mostly pro-European and target the Romanian-speaking audience from the Republic of Moldova. However, until 2022 the biased programmes were mostly focused on domestic politics (support for PPDA) rather than international affairs (support for Ukraine).

¹⁷⁸ JurnalTV, “Transparency of ownership” [in Romanian], accessed December 18, 2022, <https://www.jurnaltv.md/page/transparenta>

¹⁷⁹ Adrian Gițu, “Declaration on own responsibility regarding the insurance of the transparency of the ownership of the media service provider – Appendix 1” [in Romanian], November 10, 2015 and Valentin Butnaru, “Declaration on own responsibility regarding the insurance of the transparency of the ownership of the media service provider – Appendix 5” [in Romanian], November 10, 2022.

¹⁸⁰ Zaharescu, “Television masters: What (hasn’t) changed three years after Plahotniuc and Șor left the Republic of Moldova.”

¹⁸¹ AV Council, “The Activity of AV Council in the Year 2021,” 81.

¹⁸² AV Council, “Annual Activity Report 2022 -Appendix 1”, 46.

The channel “Pro TV Chişinău” is one of the first private TV channels from the Republic of Moldova. Its declaration regarding transparency of ownership is available on its website and states that the licence of the channel is owned by the company “Pro Digital,” whose beneficiaries and shareholders come from Europe and USA.¹⁸³ The director of “Pro TV Chişinău” is a non-politically affiliated Moldovan citizen.

Between 2017-2022, the channel received 6 public notices and 5 fines related to the fairness of information and the origin of the programmes. Therefore, it transmitted less locally produced content than it is stipulated in the AV Code. However, it is important to mention that some of the shows transmitted by “Pro TV Chişinău” are created by or in cooperation with “Pro TV Romania.” As a result, they are not produced under the jurisdiction of the Republic of Moldova. Equally important, all the programmes (re)broadcasted by “Pro TV Chişinău” are in the Romanian language.

In the informative programmes, news about President Dodon (and PSRM), President Sandu (and PAS), Mr. Plahotniuc and an independent candidate were presented in an unbalanced manner. In most of the cases they were presented in critical situations, without including their comments. However, it should be noted that the channel presented proportionally more negative information about President Dodon and BCS than any other politicians or parties, while the language of the moderators was neutral.¹⁸⁴

In 2022, the channel shared unbalanced news about the war in Ukraine. Most of the penalties noted that not all the information sources were mentioned, while other programmes were biased towards the Ukrainian side because they did not include the comments of Russian officials.¹⁸⁵ Consequently, the channel “Pro TV Chişinău” targets the Romanian speaking public and does not have an exaggerated biased political content. Thus, its political content is preponderantly presented in a neutral manner. However, considering the owners and the programmes about the war in Ukraine, it also furthers pro-European narratives.

“TV 8” is a channel that was founded at the end of 2017 and has programmes in both Romanian and Russian. According to all the reports and declarations published on the website, the licence of the channel is owned by the non-profit organisation “Media Alternativă,” whose leading members and beneficial owners are Moldovan independent journalists, who are not

¹⁸³ ProTV Chişinău, “The transparency of the property of the media service provider: ProTV Chişinău” [in Romanian], accessed November 10, 2022, <https://protv.md/contacts>

¹⁸⁴ AV Council, “The results of the monitoring of the coverage of the electoral campaign in the anticipated parliamentary elections of July 11, 2021, in the main news bulletins by audiovisual media service providers” [in Romanian], Report June 26 - July 11, 2021, 54.

¹⁸⁵ AV Council, “Annual Activity Report 2022 -Appendix 1,” 32-33.

known for being politically affiliated.¹⁸⁶ However, the initial administrator of the TV channel resigned in 2021, after she confirmed her connections with a Moldovan businessman accused for being involved in the 2014 bank fraud.¹⁸⁷ Then, the new leading team announced that this declaration might negatively affect the public image of the institution as independent and honest.¹⁸⁸ At the same time, the TV channel concluded partnerships for funds with donors from Europe and USA.¹⁸⁹

Between 2017-2022 the channel received 4 public notices and 3 fines regarding the local political content and language. Between 2017-2018, the information was presented in a neutral manner, but the channel received penalties for sharing proportionally more news about PSRM. Between 2019-2020 the programmes transmitted information in favour of President Sandu and against President Dodon, without including the comments of the parties involved. Furthermore, in 2022, the channel received a public notice for having less content in Romanian.¹⁹⁰ The channel “TV 8” declared that in this particular case, it had less content in Romanian because they had to replace one of the talk-shows in Romanian with one in Russian, due to technical reasons.¹⁹¹ Consequently, the channel does not have a noticeable biased content, but, considering its funding and the sanctions, it can be considered as pro-European.

The last TV channel included in Table 3 is the only TV channel from this analysis that is publicly owned. Therefore, its structure of ownership is related to the members of the parliament and the AV Council. The company “Teleradio-Moldova” is the owner and license holder of “Moldova 1.”¹⁹² The company had a long history of broadcasting on the Moldovan territory since 1940 and became a Public Broadcasting Institution in 2004.¹⁹³ According to its status and the guidelines of the AV Code, the company “Teleradio-Moldova” “ensures fair, equidistant and impartial information of all categories of citizens throughout the Republic of Moldova and abroad, respecting political balance, freedom of expression and pluralism of opinion.”¹⁹⁴ It claims to be politically independent, but since 1994 it is a member of the

¹⁸⁶ TV8, “Financial reports” [in Romanian], accessed March 3, 2023, <https://tv8.md/raporte-financiare>

¹⁸⁷ IPN, “Media NGOs, worried following the statement of journalist Natalia Morari” [in Romanian], September 8, 2021, accessed April 21, 2023, https://www.ipn.md/ro/ong-urile-de-media-ingrijorate-in-urma-declaratiei-jurnalistei-natalia-morari-7967_1084253.html

¹⁸⁸ IPN, “Media NGOs, worried following the statement of journalist Natalia Morari.”

¹⁸⁹ TV8.

¹⁹⁰ AV Council, “Annual Activity Report 2022 -Appendix 1,” 49.

¹⁹¹ AV Council, “Annual Activity Report 2022 -Appendix 1,” 4.

¹⁹² Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Code no. 174, Article 37.

¹⁹³ Teleradio-Moldova, “Historic,” accessed December 20, 2022, <https://trm.md/en/teleradio-moldova>

¹⁹⁴ Teleradio-Moldova, “Historic,”

European Broadcasting Union and has multiple partnerships with other broadcasting companies from Europe.¹⁹⁵

In 2017, the highest authority in the company was the supervisory board, whose members were elected by the parliament and, subsequently, they elected the general director of the company “Teleradio-Moldova” and the director of the channel “Moldova 1.”¹⁹⁶ Only politically non-affiliated individuals were eligible for these positions.¹⁹⁷

The activity of the supervisory board of “Teleradio-Moldova” between 2017-2019 was highly criticised by the AV Council, the ACUM members and even some members of the board itself. In June 2019, the company was accused of not fulfilling the legal conditions for appointing the general director and did not respect the principle of transparency and objectivity, according to the new AV Code that was implemented in January 2019.¹⁹⁸ Furthermore, the deputies from ACUM accused “Moldova 1” of broadcasting information in favour of PDM, which was governing until June 2019.¹⁹⁹ Thus, the parliament demanded the resignation of the supervisory board’s president, the general director of “Teleradio-Moldova” and the director of “Moldova 1”.²⁰⁰ In return, the company asked for public support in raising the awareness that these accusations are trying to politicise “Teleradio-Moldova” and the channel “Moldova 1,” and reaffirmed its mission of respecting “the right of the citizens to correct, objective and equidistant information.”²⁰¹ Asked by the director of “Moldova 1” if the current demands for resignation confirm the rumours that “the Socialist Party will get (the control of) the public radio channel, the Democratic Party will take the television and the company will belong to PAS,”²⁰² President Dodon claimed it is not true. In spite of this dispute between the government

¹⁹⁵ Teleradio-Moldova, “Historic,”

¹⁹⁶ Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Code no. 174, Article 32&43.

¹⁹⁷ Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Code no. 174, Article 37&43.

¹⁹⁸ AV Council, “Decision regarding the examination of the approach of the member of the Supervisory Board of NPBI the Company <<Teleradio-Moldova>>, Larisa Călugăru, and the Performance Evaluation Report of the management of NPBI the Company <<Teleradio-Moldova>> for the year 2017” [in Romanian], Decision 31/99, July 29, 2019.

¹⁹⁹ Agora.md, “<<You laundered the money and became part of the holding.>> Spirits ardent at the <<Teleradio-Moldova>> hearing at the Parliament [in Romanian], July 10, 2019, accessed April 12, 2023 <https://agora.md/stiri/59233/ati-spalat-banii-si-ati-facut-parte-din-holding--spirite-incinse-la-audierea-teleradio-moldova-la-parlament-video>

²⁰⁰ AV Council, Decision 31/99.

²⁰¹ Maria Ciobanu, “The management of <<Teleradio-Moldova>> complains of political pressure and requests help from diplomatic missions”, July 10, 2019, accessed April 11, 2023, <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/politic/conducerea-teleradio-moldova-reclama-presiuni-politice-si-solicita-ajutor-misiunilor-diplomatice/>

²⁰² Stela Mihailovici, “ACCUSATION: The government allegedly shared the management functions at <<Teleradio Moldova>>. What Igor Dodon answers”, TV8, July 11, 2019, accessed April 11, 2023, <https://tv8.md/2019/07/11/acuzatie-guvernarea-ar-fi-partajat-functiile-de-conducere-la-teleradio-moldova-ce-raspunde-igor-dodon>

and the public TV channel, the ownership of the company remained the same until all the directors reached the end of their terms, according to the AV Code. Furthermore, it was an event that made the public TV channel reaffirm its commitment to respecting its independent status, the right to information and avoid any political control of its members or broadcasted programmes.

During the presidency of Mr. Dodon, the AV Council was led only by non-politically affiliated individuals, except the president of the AV Council from 2020 who was a former member of PSRM and former journalist at a mass-media outlet affiliated with the party.²⁰³ Electing this member was highly criticised by the pro-European opposition, which declared that the AV Council became politicised.²⁰⁴ During the same period, the company “Teleradio-Moldova” was led by an expert with working experience in both European and Russian mass-media institutions.²⁰⁵ The channel “Moldova 1” was led by a journalist with experience in European mass-media institutions.²⁰⁶ Furthermore, the monitoring realised by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Centre for Independent Journalism (Moldovan NGO) proved that, during the 2020 presidential elections, the informative programmes of “Moldova 1” favoured Mr. Dodon.²⁰⁷

In 2021, the activity of the AV Council and of the public TV company “Teleradio-Moldova” was again criticised by pro-European politicians, mainly by the newly elected President Sandu. The parliament considered that the contest organised by the AV Council to appoint the director of “Teleradio-Moldova” was not fair, so the parliament issued a law to be in charge of appointing not only the members of the AV Council, but also the director of “Teleradio-Moldova.”²⁰⁸ Furthermore, at the end of 2021 the parliament rejected the 2020 annual report of the AV Council and appointed new members and the new director of “Teleradio-Moldova,” claiming that the previous leadership did not monitor correctly the broadcasted content and did not combat disinformation.²⁰⁹ From all the newly appointed

²⁰³ Freedom House, “Report regarding freedom of mass-media in the Republic of Moldova 2020,” [in Romanian], September 2021, 5.

²⁰⁴ Freedom House, “Report regarding freedom of mass-media in the Republic of Moldova 2020”, 5.

²⁰⁵ Olga Bordeianu, Curriculum Vitae, “Teleradio-Moldova,” accessed March 20, 2023, <https://trm.md/files/Concurs%20Director%20General%20al%20TRM/CV%20Olga%20Bordeianu.pdf>

²⁰⁶ Ecaterina Stratan, Curriculum Vitae, “Ziarul de Garda,” accessed March 20 2023, https://www.zdg.md/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Ecaterina_Stratan_CV.pdf

²⁰⁷ Freedom House, “Report regarding freedom of mass-media in the Republic of Moldova 2020,” 5.

²⁰⁸ Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Code no. 174 Article 36.

²⁰⁹ IPN, “The Parliament fired AV Council” [in Romanian], November 11, 2021, accessed April 23, 2023, https://www.ipn.md/ro/parlamentul-a-demis-consiliul-audiovizualului-7967_1085704.html

members in leading positions, only one had a previous political affiliation that supported closer relations with Romania and the EU.²¹⁰

Considering these accusations during the terms of both presidents, the following analysis outlines whether the broadcasted content of “Moldova 1” from 2017 to 2022 respected the provisions of the AV Code. Regarding the origin of content and language, between 2017-2022 the channel respected the legal norms in producing local programmes under the jurisdiction of the Republic of Moldova and re-broadcasting programmes from foreign producers. In the same period, the channel received from the AV Council a total of 5 public notices and 2 fines related to the political content. Most of these sanctions referred to events that were presented in a biased manner, because the programme included only the opinion of one party involved in the conflict. For example, in 2019, the channel was sanctioned for showing more positive facts about PSRM and more negative facts about Prime Minister Sandu, without including her declarations.²¹¹ Even if it did not receive any relevant sanctions in 2017, 2018 and 2020, the monitoring reports noted that during the political campaigns between 2017-2019, PSRM and its members were usually presented in a more positive manner compared to others and the TV channel did not respect the political pluralism.²¹²

It is relevant to mention that during the 2021 parliamentary elections, the monitoring reports still concluded that most of the positive information was about BCS and Mr. Dodon, followed by PPDA and Ms. Sandu.²¹³ This note referred only to the nature of events selected for broadcasting, not to the narratives or language used by the journalists to depreciate or praise a specific candidate.²¹⁴ Moreover, it is important to mention that President Sandu came to power at the end of 2020 and, as previously mentioned, she rejected the AV Council report from 2020 and changed the members of the AV Council and of the company “Teleradio-

²¹⁰ AV Council, “Members,” accessed March 20, 2023 <https://consiliuaudiovizual.md/members/> and IPN, “Vlad Turcanu, the new director of Teleradio-Moldova” [in Romanian], December 3, 2021, accessed March 20, 2023, https://www.ipn.md/ro/vlad-turcanu-noul-director-teleradio-moldova-7967_1086250.html and IPN, “The journalist and TV producer Corneliu Durnescu is the new director of Moldova 1” [in Romanian], December 12, 2021, accessed March 20, 2023, https://www.ipn.md/ro/jurnalistul-si-producatorul-tv-corneliu-durnescu-este-noul-director-7967_1086487.html

²¹¹ AV Council, “Report regarding the Activity of AV Council in the Year 2019” [in Romanian], (Chişinău, February 25, 2020), 197.

²¹² The AV Council “Examination of the results of the monitoring of television channels during the periods May 10-20 and May 23-June 03, 2018], Decision 17/104, June 8, 2018 and “Decision regarding the examination of the Monitoring Report of the main informative bulletins of the television stations “Moldova-1”, “Prime”, “Canal 3”, “RTR Moldova”, “Publika TV”, “TV 8”, “Accent TV”, “Pro TV Chisinau”, “Jurnal TV”, “ITV”, “Ren Moldova” and “NTV Moldova” in the chapter on compliance with electoral legislation”, Decision 29/212, November 30, 2017 and CJI, “Monitoring of the mass media in the electoral campaign for the presidential elections from November 1, 2020” [in Romanian], Report no. 4, October 15-22, 2020, 7.

²¹³ CJI and The Civic Coalition for Free and Fair Elections, 5-6.

²¹⁴ CJI and The Civic Coalition for Free and Fair Elections, 5-6.

Moldova” at the end of 2021. Equally important, in 2022, the channel was sanctioned for broadcasting biased news and President Sandu’s declarations, which negatively portrayed PPŞ, without including the opinions of the party.²¹⁵

Thus, throughout 2017-2022, the public channel “Moldova 1” had a few transgressions regarding freedom of speech and political pluralism. At the same time, it should be mentioned that the channel presented slightly biased information for both presidents during their mandates, except for 2017 when the support for PSRM exceeded 60% of the electoral news.²¹⁶ Furthermore, it is difficult to assess the monitored content and the efficiency of the sanctions from 2019-2021, since they were challenged by President Sandu and pro-European deputies. However, it can be concluded that the broadcasted information by “Moldova 1” was not officially influenced by any political entity and it mainly maintained a neutral political position.

Consequently, the empirical evidence analysed in this section shows that 4 out of the 11 TV channels preferred by the Moldovan society for news had informative content directly (re)broadcasted from Russian producers. At the same time, considering their owners and support for pro-Russian political parties, 7 out of 11 TV channels furthered pro-Russian narratives. Between 2017-2018, the TV channels (re)transmitted Russian news on various topics and, in 2022, on the war in Ukraine. Therefore, in these periods, the Moldovan audience of these channels was mostly exposed to an unbalanced coverage of international politics, because the narratives were biased towards a pro-Russian perspective. Furthermore, the findings certified the presence of Russian influence on Moldovan mass-media also through cultural and social shows that exceeded the local content in Romanian.

The support of the TV channels for pro-Russian politicians, demonstrates the link between the Russian influence and the Europeanisation process. On the one hand, it affects the opinion of the public that has the power to elect the political class and the right to be consulted within the policy-making process. On the other hand, if mass-media is politically influenced, either by local or foreign entities, it means that the regulating mechanisms are not effective and the legislative and institutional framework are corrupted. As a result, the Republic of Moldova does not comply with European AV regulations and, so, the prospects for the Moldovan Europeanisation remain low.

Considering that each channel was penalised for not reflecting in a neutral manner information regarding the candidates or political parties, it can be noticed that between 2017-

²¹⁵ AV Council, “Annual Activity Report 2022 -Appendix 4” [in Romanian], 21.

²¹⁶ The AV Council, Decision 29/212.

2022 the standards of independent and impartial mass-media still needed improvements. In 2022, even if the state was led by a pro-European government, the TV channels associated with PSRM and PPŞ were still strong, while the channels of Mr. Plahotniuc were the only ones that showed changes. Importantly, during the terms of both presidents, the AV Council reported when the televised content was exaggeratedly positive or negative towards both the government and the opposition. Therefore, there was no evident political control of the AV Council. However, as previously mentioned, the impartiality of the AV Council was questioned by some politicians and TV owners, who claimed that some channels were not sanctioned for all their biased content. Even if the connection between the members of the AV Council and the political parties is not officially recognised, it should be noted that the number of penalties received by each channel was not similar every year. At the same time, this was also influenced by the electoral periods in the Republic of Moldova, the international political events, as well as the editorial policy of the channels for each year. For example, in 2022, most of the penalties regarding unbalanced narratives and the origin and language of the content were caused by the war in Ukraine.

However, as the AV Council declared in 2022, it is difficult to assess who directly influences a TV channel, but it is easier to monitor the political content in order to demonstrate which interests are promoted the most and influence the public opinion.²¹⁷ This claim is strengthened by the legislation that forbids the TV channels to have politically affiliated beneficial owners. However, the politicians still find the means to associate with the channels, for example, through funding. For this reason, there are still many improvements to be done in order to prove the affiliation of a channel to a politician, such as adopting a regulation on the transparency of funding.²¹⁸ In order to clarify the development of mass-media reforms, the activity of the monitoring institutions in the Republic of Moldova and their link to Europeanisation, the next subchapter presents the timeline of media legislation and policies adopted by both the Republic of Moldova and the European Union between 2017-2022.

²¹⁷ Zaharescu, “Television masters: What (hasn’t) changed three years after Plahotniuc and Şor left the Republic of Moldova.”

²¹⁸ Zaharescu, “Television masters: What (hasn’t) changed three years after Plahotniuc and Şor left the Republic of Moldova.”

3.3 AV and mass-media policies in the Republic of Moldova and EU between 2017-2022

The technological developments of the 20th century brought significant changes in the media sector and the means of the transmission of information. The expansion of broadcasting services and the lack of legislative procedures about the media sector in the founding treaties of the EU proved the need for a common regulatory framework in the AV media services. TFEU was the fundamental document used for defining the legal basis for media goods and services, because its articles referred to several democratic freedoms that, indirectly, concerned the media sector.²¹⁹ For example, the articles regarding the free market, the free movement of goods, education and technology establish provisions that are also applied in the current mediatic norms.²²⁰ The only articles that clearly mention the AV or media sector are Articles 167 and 207.²²¹ The former is about the promotion of culture among member states through various means, “including in the audiovisual sector.”²²² The latter refers to the agreements concerning trade in the field of AV services.²²³ In 2012, a separate protocol on media was added to the treaty, concerning the funding of the system of public broadcasting in the member states.²²⁴

Based on TFEU, the first European act that regulated the AV services was the “Television without Frontiers Directive.”²²⁵ It was adopted in 1989 and defined the main provisions of the TV broadcasting services, such as the origin of the broadcasters and a minimum transmission time for European works.²²⁶ A consolidated version of this directive was adopted in 2010 and was renamed as the AV Media Services Directive (AVMSD). AVMSD included a more detailed framework focused on the country of origin principle, the jurisdiction over the media service providers and the creation of an internal market of AV programmes.²²⁷ The last significant amendment of AVMSD happened in 2018, due to the

²¹⁹ European Parliament, “Fact Sheets on the European Union -2023, Audiovisual and Media Policy,” accessed March 2, 2023, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/138/audiovisual-and-media-policy>

²²⁰ European Parliament, “Fact Sheets on the European Union -2023, Audiovisual and Media Policy.”

²²¹ TFEU, Article 167 and 207.

²²² TFEU, Article 167.

²²³ TFEU, Article 207.

²²⁴ “Protocol (No 29) on the system of public broadcasting in the Member States to the Consolidated version of TFEU,” C 326/1, October 26, 2012.

²²⁵ European Parliament, “Fact Sheets on the European Union -2023, Audiovisual and Media Policy.”

²²⁶ Council of the European Union, “Council Directive 89/552/EEC of 3 October 1989 on the coordination of certain provisions laid down by Law, Regulation or Administrative Action in Member States concerning the pursuit of television broadcasting activities”, OJ L 298, October 17, 1989.

²²⁷ The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union “Directive 2010/13/EU of certain provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States concerning the provision of audiovisual media services” OJ L 95/1, March 10, 2010.

constant development of technology and the European enlargement.²²⁸ The main provisions reflect ensuring a fair market competition, expanding the preservation of cultural diversity, the consumer and minor protection and the access to information.²²⁹

In the Republic of Moldova, the AV services are regulated by a complex legislation, which includes both local and international normative acts. The main legislative act issued in the Republic of Moldova that manages and is responsible for the development of the AV media services is the AV Code. In order to have a trustworthy system of information, protect the rights of the citizens and ensure their access to correct and objective information, all the AV providers need to respect the norms stipulated in the AV Code. As outlined in the previous subchapter, the main body responsible for the activity of the AV services is the AV Council. Its members cannot be politically affiliated, but they are appointed by the parliament (100% responsibility until 2018), government, president and the civil society organisations (since 2019). Furthermore, they have the power to issue normative acts and sanction the providers which do not comply to the AV legislation.

The previous analysis showed that each year, the TV channels received different sanctions based on their content and on the regulations that were in force during that time. Nevertheless, the efficiency of the monitoring was also contested. For example, in 2021, during the Presidency of Ms. Sandu and the government led by PSRM and PDM, the civil society organisations were criticising the lack of regulatory bodies responsible for the legislative oversight:

our media market is oversaturated with Russian-language productions, but the Council of the Audiovisual doesn't want to take any measures, even though the Code of Audiovisual Media Services, such as it is, provides some possible steps. The issue is that the council members are not willing to enter a conflict with the governing Party of Socialists, which controls a large share of the television media market.²³⁰

Therefore, it can be noticed that even if the country had just elected a pro-European president, the opposition was still influential in the decision-making process. Furthermore, just like any other legislative act in the Republic of Moldova, the AV Code must be approved by the parliament of the Republic of Moldova and promulgated by the president. Therefore,

²²⁸ European Parliament, "Fact Sheets on the European Union -2023, Audiovisual and Media Policy."

²²⁹ The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, "Directive (EU) 2018/1808 of 14 November 2018 amending Directive 2010/13/EU on the coordination of certain provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States concerning the provision of audiovisual media services in view of changing market realities," OJ L 303, November 28, 2018.

²³⁰ WatchDog.MD Community, "Moldova," 167.

depending on the political interests, it suffered several changes between 2017-2022. For this reason, this subchapter chronologically analyses the developments of the AV sector in respect to the local political context, as well as the international commitments of the Republic of Moldova between 2017-2022. In this regard, it is emphasised the connection between the political context and the Europeanisation process. The analysis focuses on the mechanisms created by the pro-Russian and pro-European governments to regulate the AV services according to European standards. Thus, it is underlined if and how their approaches facilitated the Europeanisation process of the state.

As part of its Europeanisation process, the Republic of Moldova concluded many partnerships and agreements with European institutions, regarding the development of its AV services. Considering that not all EU regulations on the AV services are applicable to the Republic of Moldova, the Moldovan legislation was modified until 2022 only in respect to several international normative acts: ECTT, the European Convention on Human Rights, the 2014 Association Agreement and AVMSD from 2010 and 2018.²³¹ One of the most important ones was the ECTT, which was ratified by the Republic of Moldova in 2003.²³² Issued by the members of the Council of Europe, the Convention consolidated the broadcasting framework by determining the responsibilities of the broadcasters and the legal standards for sponsorships and advertising.²³³ Furthermore, it promoted Europe's cultural heritage and the transfrontier transmission of TV programmes in accordance with the democratic principles, such as "the free flow of information and ideas and the independence of broadcasters."²³⁴ ECTT played a significant role in the restriction of Russian televised content in the Republic of Moldova. However, its implementation took place only after 2018, as a result of the European Action Plans and the support of the ACUM bloc, as follows.

The Council of Europe implemented several Action Plans in the Republic of Moldova that aimed strengthening the bilateral cooperation and assisting the state in the implementation of new regulations in multiple sectors.²³⁵ As part of these Action Plans, between 2017-2020 and 2021-2024, the Republic of Moldova was involved in Joint Programmes of the Council of Europe and EU, focused on aligning the Moldovan AV performance to European standards,

²³¹ AV Council, "Legal Framework" [in Romanian], accessed March 5, 2023, <https://consiliuaudiovizual.md/council-of-legal-framework/>

²³² Council of Europe, "Chart of signatures and ratifications of Treaty 132," <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=signatures-by-treaty&treaty=132>

²³³ Council of Europe, "European Convention on Transfrontier Television" (ETS No. 132), May 5, 1989, 1.

²³⁴ Council of Europe, ETS No. 132, 1.

²³⁵ Council of Europe, "Action Plan for the Republic of Moldova 2021-2024", Office of the Directorate General of Programmes, November 19, 2020, 2.

such as improving the quality of TV programmes and strengthening the activity of the public service broadcaster and the regulatory framework on mass-media pluralism and freedom of expression.²³⁶ Furthermore, the Moldovan parliament, together with the AV Council, the public broadcaster “Teleradio-Moldova,” mass-media outlets and mass-media civil society organisations were involved as the main partners in the promotion and implementation process of the projects.²³⁷

One of the most significant accomplishments of the Action Plan 2017-2020 was the implementation in the Republic of Moldova of a new AV Code, which included modifications in line with the AVMSD from 2010.²³⁸ Therefore, adopting the new AV Code was an important step in aligning the Moldovan mass-media regulations to European standards. However, the new AV Code was a significant topic for debate for the pro-Russians and pro-Europeans. Initially, President Dodon refused to promulgate it in 2018, mainly because of Article 17, which transposed ECTT into the AV Code and was locally known as the “anti-propaganda bill.”²³⁹ This article was criticised because it was limiting the origin of the content only to the EU, USA, Canada and the countries that ratified ECTT. Thus, it excluded the Russian Federation.²⁴⁰ Apart from the new AV Code, the president refused in a short period of time to promulgate other five laws adopted twice by the Parliament. For example, he disagreed with declaring 9th of May as a national holiday to celebrate Europe Day, because “we celebrated and we will celebrate the Victory Day.”²⁴¹ Therefore, the Constitutional Court temporarily suspended him, for the fifth time since he became president, because he did not respect the constitutional provisions to promulgate the laws that were passed twice by the parliament.²⁴²

Nevertheless, the “anti-propaganda bill” started a debate in the Moldovan society, being criticised even by independent mass-media institutions, because they considered that it was

²³⁶ Council of Europe, “MOLDOVA Promoting European standards in the audio-visual regulation,” accessed February 25, 2023, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/moldova-promoting-european-standards-in-the-audio-visual-regulation> and Council of Europe office in Chişinău, “Support for Media Pluralism and Freedom of Expression in the Republic of Moldova,” accessed March 2, 2023, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/chisinau/media-pluralism-and-freedom-of-expression>

²³⁷ Council of Europe, “MOLDOVA Promoting European standards in the audio-visual regulation.”

²³⁸ Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Code no. 174.

²³⁹ WatchDog.MD Community, “Moldova,” 164.

²⁴⁰ IPN, “The President did not promulgate the Audiovisual Media Services Code” [in Romanian], November 6, 2018, accessed March 24, 2023, <https://www.ipn.md/ro/politica/94594>

²⁴¹ Diana Gaţcan, “Igor Dodon VS Parliament. Why was the president suspended and what laws did he refuse to enact”, Ziarul de Gardă, December 10, 2018, accessed April 21, 2023, <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/politic/igor-dodon-vs-parlamentul-de-ce-a-fost-suspendat-presedintele-si-ce-legi-a-refuzat-sa-promulge/>

²⁴² Moldpress, “The head of state will be suspended from office for refusing to promulgate more laws” [in Romanian], December 10, 2018, accessed April 20, 2023, <https://www.moldpres.md/news/2018/12/10/18011031>

undemocratic to claim that an information is manipulative based on its country of origin.²⁴³ They declared that the AV Code was already supposed to prevent propaganda by stipulating that the informative content must be objective and respect the socio-political balance, but they considered that the AV Council lacked enough competences to implement all these regulations.²⁴⁴ An expert considered that this law was rather the political interest of PDM government than a democratic regulation, because it restricted the access to open sources that would have influenced the public opinion and weakened the electorate of PDM in the upcoming elections.²⁴⁵ However, as the analysis from the previous subchapter outlined, some channels found a solution to continue re-broadcasting informative content by including the news from Russian producers in their own news bulletins. An expert claimed that it would be more democratic and efficient to create a solution to combat both foreign and domestic propaganda, making a reference to the Baltic States that did not censor Russian content, but they constantly monitored the broadcasted programmes and reported all the transgressions to the judicial branch to take the necessary measures.²⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the AV Code entered into force at the beginning of 2019, reiterating the commitment of the Republic of Moldova to modify the legislation in accordance to European standards, such as the 2010 AVMSD.²⁴⁷

As part of the Action Plan 2017-2020, the project “Promoting European standards in the AV regulation of the Republic of Moldova” registered, until 2021, “some progress.”²⁴⁸ This meant that it did not yet achieve concrete results, but there were ongoing activities that gradually achieved the outputs and indicated the potential outcomes.²⁴⁹ Significantly, the review of the plan concluded that the pandemic-related restrictions negatively influenced several projects and created an unfavourable setting.²⁵⁰ On the one hand, the public service broadcaster “Teleradio-Moldova” received recommendations and assessments on how to improve its professionalism, as well as strengthen the Ombudsperson Service.²⁵¹ The

²⁴³ Natalia Sergheev, “How Moldovan television stations circumvent the new anti-propaganda law” [in Romanian], Radio Free Europe Moldova, February 16, 2018, accessed April 9, 2023, <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/cum-ocolesc-televiziunile-moldovene-legea-anti-propaganda/29043951.html>

²⁴⁴ Marina Ciobanu, “Who benefits from the <<anti-propaganda law>> and how it will be applied in practice. Media experts vs CCA” [in Romanian], Ziarul de Gardă, January 22, 2018, accessed April 20, 2023, <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-sociale/pe-cine-avantajeaza-legea-anti-propaganda-si-cum-va-fi-aplicata-in-practica-expertii-media-vs-cca/>

²⁴⁵ Ciobanu.

²⁴⁶ Ciobanu.

²⁴⁷ Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Code no. 174.

²⁴⁸ Heidrun Ferrari and Britta Schweighöfer, “Progress Review and Final Evaluation of the Council of Europe Action Plan for the Republic of Moldova 2017-2020”, Council of Europe, February 11, 2021, 6.

²⁴⁹ Ferrari and Schweighöfer, 3.

²⁵⁰ Ferrari and Schweighöfer, 53.

²⁵¹ Ferrari and Schweighöfer, 53.

interviews conducted within the project outlined that the lack of resources, as well as the lack of ownership and political will, represented some of the factors that led to only a few concrete results.²⁵² On the other hand, the results showed that the mass-media is influenced by oligarchs and political parties, while the journalism is producing low cost content, “driven by economic imperatives.”²⁵³ Furthermore, the AV Council was considered politicised, which might affect the process of strengthening the transparency and the independence of the mass-media sector.²⁵⁴

Nevertheless, until 2021, the Moldovan legislation also had registered important developments. Together with the adoption of the new AV Code, it implemented the Media Development Strategy 2018-2025.²⁵⁵ On the same note, the state adopted a law regarding the importance of mass-media in strengthening the information security and the democratic society of the Republic of Moldova.²⁵⁶ The law emphasised the needs for new regulations, such as the lack of judicial mechanisms to safeguard independent mass-media and manage propaganda and manipulation messages. Hence, the state worked on the critiques of the civil society mentioned above.

Another legislative improvement was the approval of the National Information Security Strategy for 2019–2024. This is relevant for the research because its second pillar aims to manage the dissemination of information in mass-media, including TV channels.²⁵⁷ The document also mentions the risks of foreign influence and control over the national security policies through disinformation campaigns, as well as the poor control of the state over the malign sources of information.²⁵⁸ Therefore, it is acknowledged the power of information and the threats that it might bring to the Moldovan state and population. However, these types of mass-media regulations create several problems in the management of freedom of expression and the right to have access to information. If a state bans certain pieces of information, then it might be interpreted as censorship, which is not a democratic act. For this reason, most of the Moldovan legislation has a specific language, which is not directly banning Russian information, but it emphasises the role of the national values. As a democratic state, the

²⁵² Ferrari and Schweighöfer, 7.

²⁵³ Ferrari and Schweighöfer, 7.

²⁵⁴ Ferrari and Schweighöfer, 7.

²⁵⁵ Ferrari and Schweighöfer, 47.

²⁵⁶ Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, “Law on the approval of the National Media Development Concept of the Republic of Moldova” [in Romanian], Law no. 67, July 26, 2018.

²⁵⁷ Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, “Decision on the approval of the Information Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova for the years 2019–2024 and the Action Plan for its implementation” [in Romanian], Decision 257/2018, November 22, 2018.

²⁵⁸ Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Decision no. 257.

Republic of Moldova allows multiple sources of information and tries to educate the public how to understand the information. All these initiatives are in line with the standards of mass-media literacy and mass-media pluralism, stipulated in the 2010 AVMSD and the state is in the process of implementing the guidelines outlined in the 2018 AVMSD.²⁵⁹

Therefore, the Moldovan AV Code and AVMSD include similar principles, but the reports carried out in the Republic of Moldova by national and international entities concluded that the state still needs to improve the transparency of institutions and the independence of mass-media outlets. The total score given by Freedom House to the Republic of Moldova for 2018 was 58/100, while in 2020 the state received a total score of 61/100.²⁶⁰ In both years, the score for the existence of independent mass-media was 2/4.²⁶¹ It is argued that most of the TV channels were associated with the political elite, which pressured the journalists in presenting the news.²⁶²

In both years, the score for the freedom of people in forming a political opinion was 2/4, because oligarchs influenced the political affairs and undermined the political accountability.²⁶³ Furthermore, the right of journalists to access information became limited after the COVID-19 pandemic and this also affected the access of the civil society to information.²⁶⁴ During the state of emergency enabled in 2020, many fake-news websites related to the pandemic were illegally blocked in the Republic of Moldova.²⁶⁵ Paradoxically, in 2020, the Republic of Moldova was among the European countries most affected by foreign disinformation campaigns, most of them originating from the Russian Federation and diffused through the mass-media outlets related to PSRM and the Orthodox church.²⁶⁶ At the same time, in 2020, the regular press conferences of the government were replaced with online briefings, so the journalists were not allowed to participate and could not request additional clarifications from the authorities regarding the pandemic.²⁶⁷ Moreover, mass-media outlets and the

²⁵⁹ The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, "Directive 2010/13/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 March 2010 on the coordination of certain provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States concerning the provision of audiovisual media services," OJ L 95, April 15, 2010.

²⁶⁰ Freedom House, "Freedom in the world 2019: Moldova," (2019), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/freedom-world/2019> and "Freedom in the world 2021: Moldova," (2021), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/freedom-world/2021>

²⁶¹ Freedom House, "Freedom in the world 2019: Moldova" and "Freedom in the world 2021: Moldova."

²⁶² Freedom House, "Freedom in the world 2019: Moldova."

²⁶³ Freedom House, "Freedom in the world 2021: Moldova."

²⁶⁴ Freedom House, "Moldova: Contribution to the Report on the universal periodic assessment of the Republic of Moldova" [in Romanian], July 30, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/ro/article/moldova-contributie-la-raportul-privind-evaluarea-periodica-universala-republicii-moldova>

²⁶⁵ Freedom House, "Report regarding freedom of mass-media in the Republic of Moldova 2020," 5.

²⁶⁶ Freedom House, "Report regarding freedom of mass-media in the Republic of Moldova 2020," 6.

²⁶⁷ Freedom House, "Report regarding freedom of mass-media in the Republic of Moldova 2020," 5.

journalists that were not affiliated with PSRM, such as ProTV Chişinău, TV8 or Ziarul de Gardă, were either harassed or sued by President Dodon and the government for their articles that criticised their policies.²⁶⁸

In 2018 and 2020, the government's transparency and the measures against corruption were low and received a score of 1/4.²⁶⁹ This is relevant for the analysis because it proved the involvement of influential politicians, such as Mr. Plahotniuc and Mr. Şor, in controlling the state institutions according to their interests and maintaining political scandals unresolved, such as the 2014 bank fraud.

In 2020, the AV Code was modified again. PSRM and PPŞ abrogated the “anti-propaganda bill” (Article 17) and other provisions that referred to content produced in the EU, and to the requirements for beneficial owners of the TV channels, declaring “now we can watch any news from anywhere in the world, including Russia.”²⁷⁰ The change allowed informative programmes to be re-broadcasted from “third parties in line with the Information Security Strategy and Concept of the Republic of Moldova”²⁷¹ and enabled more connections among the beneficial owners of the TV channels and the public and political institutions.²⁷² Consequently, the TV channels were again able to retransmit informative content from the Russian Federation. Considering these changes in the legislation and the results of the previous analysis regarding the government's and president's influence over the members of the AV Council and the content of the mass-media outlets, it can be concluded that, in 2020, Moldovan mass-media was highly affected by the political and external influence. In 2020, both Moldovan and international independent mass-media institutions declared that the attitude of the government vis-à-vis mass-media outlets and journalists was “hostile.”²⁷³

Significantly, the sanctions applied in 2018 respected different regulations than the ones from 2021. For this reason, in 2018, when “Prime TV” broadcasted the speech of Russian President Vladimir Putin and “RTR Moldova” broadcasted the Victory Parade from Moscow,

²⁶⁸ Freedom House, “Report regarding freedom of mass-media in the Republic of Moldova 2020,” 6.

²⁶⁹ Freedom House, “Freedom in the world 2019: Moldova” and “Freedom in the world 2021: Moldova.”

²⁷⁰ Victoria Borodin, “Military and informative-analytical programs from Russia have returned to Moldovan TV. A PSRM deputy says that she is finally breathing <<with both lungs>>” Ziarul de Gardă, December 23, 2020, accessed April 12, 2023, <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-sociale/doc-programele-militare-si-informativ-analitice-din-rusia-au-revenit-la-tv-ul-din-r-moldova-o-deputata-psrm-spune-ca-in-sfarsit-respira-cu-ambii-plamani/>

²⁷¹ The Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, “Law for the amendment of the Audiovisual Media Services Code of the Republic of Moldova no. 174/2018” [in Romanian], Law no. 241, December 16, 2020,

²⁷² Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Code no. 174, Article 28.

²⁷³ Freedom House, “Report regarding freedom of mass-media in the Republic of Moldova 2020,” 5.

both channels received sanctions.²⁷⁴ Considering the change of government and of regulations, none of the analysed channels was sanctioned in 2021 for re-broadcasting informative Russian content, but for exceeding the quota of Moldovan produced content in Romanian.

Until 2020, the Moldovan mass-media sector received significant logistic and financial support from the EU.²⁷⁵ At the same time, several procedures were followed to create joint media productions between both banks of the Dniester River.²⁷⁶ However, the European Commission claimed that even if the AV Code imposed the quota on Moldovan-produced content, the foreign programmes were still dominating the market.²⁷⁷ Furthermore, it concluded that there was still a need to find solutions for the self-funding of the media sector, harmonize the polarised political environment and fight corruption.²⁷⁸

Even if the Republic of Moldova has a very strong capacity of mass-media and digital resilience, it has a low ability to combat “foreign led-information threats.”²⁷⁹ It is important to notice that both Moldovan and European legislative acts on mass-media have a specific language. The access to information and mass-media pluralism are sensitive terms because of the emergence of the disinformation phenomenon. Since disinformation campaigns in mass-media increased, the access to any type of information was debated and, so, mass-media pluralism was limited to some extent. The EU implemented various mechanisms to combat malign narratives that represented a threat for the information and security system. However, these were criticised as non-democratic measures, since they were considered as censorship.

Therefore, these situations portray the aspects presented in the theoretical framework of this thesis, namely, the effects of soft power and the power of information and media influence. At the same time, the empirical evidence regarding the governments’ approaches to improve the AV regulations showed a discontinuous progress. Unresolving previous crisis, such as the 2014 bank fraud, proved to be a factor that maintained a strong control of the institutional framework. At the same time, it kept the Russian-backed oligarchs in influential positions from where they limited the modifications of the mass-media sector according to European standards. Thus, they affected the Europeanisation process.

²⁷⁴ AV Council, “Decision regarding the examination of the notification of the Public Association Comunitatea for advocacy and public policies “WatchDog.md” f/no. from 12.03.2018” [in Romanian], Decision 9/53, April 5, 2018 and Decision regarding the examination of the monitoring results of the “RTR Moldova” television station, as a result of CCA Decision no. 2/6 of January 15, 2018” [in Romanian], Decision 17/106, June 8, 2018.

²⁷⁵ Landell Mills, “Evaluation of the European Union’s cooperation with the Republic of Moldova (2014-2020),” December 2021, 40.

²⁷⁶ Mills, 91.

²⁷⁷ Mills, 40.

²⁷⁸ Mills, 82.

²⁷⁹ WatchDog.MD Community, “Moldova,” 29-30.

One of the only measures supported in the public space as both democratic and effective in combating malign narratives was the education of the audience in accessing information. For this reason, the Moldovan civil society organisations in cooperation with the Moldovan government implemented various initiatives that improved the mass-media literacy of the population, such as mass-media education classes in schools.²⁸⁰ Furthermore, the necessity of these initiatives was supported by a survey from 2020, which showed that only 59% of the respondents believed they could recognise disinformation, while only 9% of them were actually able to get a perfect score in a test of mass-media literacy.²⁸¹ It is important to notice that the civil society was significantly involved in all these initiatives regarding combating disinformation. Therefore, those developments in the sphere of mass-media that were successfully realised until 2021, were, mostly, due to the strong involvement of both private and public actors, as well as the support of the EU. However, the progress was sometimes criticised for being slow and ineffective. For this reason, until 2021, the conflict of interests in the Republic of Moldova (between both the divided governments and the divided society) was strong and influenced the European and democratic developments.

Since the pro-European politicians succeeded in gaining more power in 2021, the projects regarding mass-media literacy and other European AV developments received more support from the government. Furthermore, a new Action Plan from the European Council was implemented for 2021-2025. The main goals of the plan were based on the results of the previous action plan and focused on the freedom and independence of mass-media.²⁸² Therefore, it aimed to fully consolidate the technical capabilities and help the staff of the AV Council and “Teleradio-Moldova” to have a better implementation of the AV Code and ensure the respect of democratic principles in the broadcasted content, such as political pluralism, unbiased content, hate speech and defamation.²⁸³ Furthermore, it acknowledged the need to strengthen the rule of law based on the European Council’s Recommendation from 2018 on mass-media pluralism and ownership of mass-media.²⁸⁴ Therefore, it advocated for freedom of expression and opinion, as well as raising the awareness of the influence behind editorial policies and diverse and accessible sources and views.²⁸⁵ At the same time, the European

²⁸⁰ WatchDog.MD Community, “Moldova,” 171.

²⁸¹ WatchDog.MD Community, “Moldova,” 158.

²⁸² Council of Europe, “Action Plan for the Republic of Moldova 2021-2024”, Office of the Directorate General of Programmes, November 19, 2020, 10.

²⁸³ Council of Europe, “Action Plan for the Republic of Moldova 2021-2024,” 22-23.

²⁸⁴ Council of Europe, “Action Plan for the Republic of Moldova 2021-2024,” 8.

²⁸⁵ Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, “Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)1[1] of the Committee of Ministers to member States on media pluralism and transparency of media ownership,” March 7, 2018.

Council assisted the Republic of Moldova in creating new codes of conduct regarding the implementation of the AV legislation and the involvement of the civil society organisation in electing the members of the AV Council.²⁸⁶

As previously mentioned, PSRM and PDM held the parliamentary majority until the end of 2021. Thus, the legislative process was still influenced by their political views. Furthermore, President Sandu decided to change the members of the AV Council and the public broadcaster service only at the end of 2021. Therefore, it was noticed that the political division in the Republic of Moldova affected the involvement of the pro-European politicians in the developments of mass-media. Considering the bilateral agreements and cooperation plans in 2021, the Republic of Moldova was still working on implementing the EU recommendations, which were furthered several years before. Furthermore, in the European media legislation there were no significant changes until 2022, when the war in Ukraine started. For this reason, the Republic of Moldova had, as well, adopted new regulations only in 2022, in the context of the high volumes of information related to the war.

Considering the proximity of the state to the war zone, the Republic of Moldova declared a state of emergency on the 24th of February 2022.²⁸⁷ In order to protect the national information security, since March 2022, the Exceptional Situations Commission of the Republic of Moldova obliged the AV services to re-broadcast informative, military and political content that was produced only by the signatory parties of ECTT, USA, Canada and EU member states.²⁸⁸ In June 2022, president Sandu promulgated the law on information security, in order to keep the regulation about the origin of content available even after the end of the state of emergency.²⁸⁹ Other modifications of the AV Code included a definition for disinformation and stronger sanctions for propaganda and the quotas of Moldovan-produced content.²⁹⁰ Therefore, as an effect of both the pro-European leadership and the war in Ukraine, the AV legislation became stronger regarding the safeguarding of local content and preventing propaganda.

Another important development that happened in 2022 in the Moldovan mass-media started from the decision of the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets to

²⁸⁶ Council of Europe, "Action Plan for the Republic of Moldova 2021-2024," 22.

²⁸⁷ The Parliament of The Republic of Moldova, "Decision regarding the declaration of the state of emergency" [in Romanian], Decision no. 41, February 24, 2022,

²⁸⁸ Commission for exceptional situations of the Republic of Moldova, "Regulation no. 5" [in Romanian], March 2, 2022.

²⁸⁹ IPN, "Liliana Vițu: The information security law was promulgated" [in Romanian], June 18, 2022, accessed April 5, 2023, https://www.ipn.md/ro/liliana-vitu-legea-securitatii-informationale-a-fost-promulgata-7965_1090513.html

²⁹⁰ IPN, "Liliana Vițu: The information security law was promulgated."

sanction “oligarchs widely recognized for capturing and corrupting Moldova’s political and economic institutions and those acting as instruments of Russia’s global influence campaign, which seeks to manipulate the United States and its allies and partners, including Moldova and Ukraine.”²⁹¹ Mr. Plahotniuc, Mr. Șor and Mr. Chaika were among the individuals whose access and possessions in the United States were blocked.²⁹² Mr. Plahotniuc was accused of acts of corruption by influencing the judicial system, elections, mass-media outlets and the government, in order to strengthen his position and weaken anyone from the opposition.²⁹³ Mr. Șor and Mr. Chaika were accused of being involved in the Russian governmental operations to undermine President Sandu and “return Moldova to Russia's sphere of influence.”²⁹⁴ Mr. Chaika formed an alliance with Mr. Șor and Mr. Dodon, through which PPȘ and PSRM gained Russian support and funds in the 2021 elections and backed a pro-Russian legislation that took the Moldovan intelligence agency out of the president’s control.²⁹⁵ As a result of these sanctions, in December 2022, the Exceptional Situations Commission of the Republic of Moldova suspended the licence of six TV channels, including “RTR Moldova”, “NTV Moldova” and “Primul în Moldova”. The decision was made in order to “protect the national informational space and prevent the risk of disinformation through dissemination of false information or the attempt to manipulate the public opinion”.²⁹⁶ President Sandu saluted this decision, emphasizing the need to protect the state from “fugitives who want only one thing – to escape justice.”²⁹⁷ The TV channels criticised this decision, saying that it violated the “European Convention on Human Rights, democracy, the rule of law and pluralism.”²⁹⁸ Therefore, the end of 2022 proved a significant step in fighting corruption and the foreign influence on the Moldovan mass-media. Furthermore, the US sanctions proved the connections between Moldovan and Russian oligarchs and their involvement in the Moldovan corruption incidents.

²⁹¹ U.S. Department of the Treasury.

²⁹² U.S. Department of the Treasury.

²⁹³ U.S. Department of the Treasury.

²⁹⁴ U.S. Department of the Treasury.

²⁹⁵ U.S. Department of the Treasury.

²⁹⁶ Commission for exceptional situations of the Republic of Moldova, “Regulation no. 54” [in Romanian], December 16, 2022.

²⁹⁷ Ziarul de Gardă, “President Sandu's first statement after the CES's decision to suspend the broadcast license for six TV stations: "Protecting the national information space is an important step to prevent attempts at destabilization, set up by people subject to international sanctions", December 16, 2022, accessed April 12, 2023, <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-sociale/prima-declaratie-a-presedintei-sandu-dupa-decizia-cse-de-a-suspenda-licenta-de-emisie-pentru-sase-posturi-tv-protejarea-spatiului-informatiional-national-este-un-pas-important-pentru-prevenirea-tent/>

²⁹⁸ Ziarul de Gardă, “President Sandu's first statement after the CES's decision to suspend the broadcast license for six TV stations: "Protecting the national information space is an important step to prevent attempts at destabilization, set up by people subject to international sanctions."

In November 2022, representatives of the Moldovan mass-media sector and Freedom House, together with national and international political entities, organised a mass-media forum in Chişinău, in order to debate the situation of mass-media in the Republic of Moldova.²⁹⁹ They issued a resolution that concluded the lack of efficient mechanisms to fight the information warfare, the intensification of foreign interferences in the local mass-media and the lack of communication between the authorities and representatives of mass-media.³⁰⁰ Nevertheless, they also noticed an improvement of the media legislation and of the activity of the AV Council to implement it.³⁰¹ Therefore, it can be noticed that the common goals that were part of the Action Plans were gradually achieving.

In both 2021 and 2022, the Republic of Moldova received a total freedom score of 62/100, higher than the previous years.³⁰² However, the results regarding media and corruption from 2021 and 2022 were identical with the 2018 and 2020 Freedom House reports. Therefore, in 2021 and 2022, the independence of media was evaluated as 2/4, mentioning the links of the politicians and oligarchs with media, the intensified control of the parliament over the national public broadcaster and the AV Council, as well as restricting the access to Russian programmes.³⁰³ In both years, the score for the freedom of people in forming a political opinion was also 2/4, because the oligarchs influenced the political affairs.³⁰⁴ Regarding corruption and the transparency of the government, the results indicated again a score of 1/4.³⁰⁵ However, it is important to mention that the scores were given based on the events that happened in 2021 and 2022, such as the arrests and national investigations of former president Dodon, Mr. Furculiţă and PPŞ.³⁰⁶ Consequently, the allegations regarding the oligarchs and pro-Russian supporters from the Republic of Moldova were brought out, proving that corruption and the external control of public institutions was weakening. Since these actions happened at the end of 2022, there cannot be noticed significant changes in the mass-media sector or the televised content in that year. However, restricting the control of these influential actors, increased the prospects for Moldovan Europeanisation.

²⁹⁹ API, “Mass-Media Forum 2022: on free, safe and sustainable journalism in wartime,” November 30, 2022, accessed April 21, 2022, <https://www.api.md/ro/forumul-mass-media-2022-despre-jurnalism-liber-sigur-si-sustenabil-pe-timp-de-razboi/new/>

³⁰⁰ Media Forum of the Republic of Moldova, “Resolution”, Chişinău, November 22-23, 2022.

³⁰¹ Media Forum of the Republic of Moldova.

³⁰² Freedom House, “Freedom in the world 2023: Moldova,” (2023),

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/freedom-world/2023> and “Freedom in the world 2022: Moldova,” (2022), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/freedom-world/2022>

³⁰³ Freedom House, “Freedom in the world 2023: Moldova” and “Freedom in the world 2022: Moldova,”

³⁰⁴ Freedom House, “Freedom in the world 2023: Moldova” and “Freedom in the world 2022: Moldova,”

³⁰⁵ Freedom House, “Freedom in the world 2023: Moldova” and “Freedom in the world 2022: Moldova,”

³⁰⁶ Freedom House, “Freedom in the world 2023: Moldova.”

Considering all the aspects chronologically presented in this chapter about the foreign influence and the interference of the governments in the AV content and legislation, it is important to analyse the phenomenon also from the perspective of the elite and pluralist model and refer to the entire media sector. It can be argued that during the presidency of Mr. Dodon, Moldovan media was perceived through the elite model. Media was mostly transmitting the messages of politicians and policymakers who perceived foreign policy as an outcome of the external factors affecting the country.³⁰⁷ At the same time, the president preferred to give interviews and interact with journalists from the Russian-related media outlets. For example, a Russian-founded media outlet from the Republic of Moldova wrote about President Dodon's meeting with President Putin in Moscow, where he mentioned that the strategic partnership with the Russian Federation will defend the Moldovan neutrality and statehood, protect the Orthodox values and solve the Transnistrian problem.³⁰⁸ Furthermore, the two leaders exchanged gifts, a statuette and a map, that recalled the common past and the prosperous bilateral relations.³⁰⁹ In another article, it is outlined the presence of the Moldovan President at Victory parade in Moscow, where the Moldovan anthem was played, signifying that that "the feat of our compatriots is not forgotten."³¹⁰ Thus, media was used as an instrument to present the benefits of the Moldovan-Russian cooperation.

Even if President Dodon mentioned that he wanted to pursue a balanced policy with both the East and West, the official communiques of the Moldovan presidency showed that he had more official visits and conversations with the leaders from the post-Soviet countries.³¹¹ He was the first Moldovan leader who had an official visit to the Russian Federation since 2008. However, in order to prove his balanced policy, the press always mentioned the events where the Moldovan president had the chance to meet leaders from other countries. For example, the presidency issued a communique mentioning the informal discussions between President Dodon and other leaders during the 2020 World Holocaust Forum, even if they were

³⁰⁷ Smith, Hadfield and Dunne, 200.

³⁰⁸ Tatiana Vladimirska and Irina Shlapa, "Results of the historic meeting of the presidents of Moldova and Russia: There are no contradictions, let's start work!" [in Russian], KP.md, January 17, 2017, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.kp.md/daily/26630/3649990/>

³⁰⁹ Lydia Tkach, "Vladimir Putin presented Igor Dodon with a map of Moldova, on which she owns a part of Romania" [in Russian], KP.md, January 17, 2017, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.kp.md/daily/26631/3650014/>

³¹⁰ Igor Krudu, "On Victory Day, the anthem of Moldova sounded in the Red Square in Moscow!" [in Russian], KP.md, May 9, 2017, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.kp.md/daily/26676.7/3698777/>

³¹¹ The Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, "Press Releases," <https://presedinte.md/rom/comunicate-de-presa>

actually short encounters in-between the panels rather than significant discussions.³¹² It is important to notice that this communique just mentioned all the leaders with whom President Dodon met, without giving additional details regarding their conversations. At the same time, the international leaders did not publish any statements, respectively, about their informal discussions with their Moldovan counterpart. Consequently, the political influence on mass-media and the elite model could be noticed in the presidency of Mr. Dodon by comparing what topics were presented in the short versus the long communiques. The former just listed the informal meetings of the president with other international political actors, in order to prove the good relations with the West. Opposingly, the latter outlined the actions taken as part of the collaboration between the Republic of Moldova and the post-Soviet countries.

Moreover, it is important to mention that the official surveys presented an increase from 45% in 2017³¹³ to 59.3% in 2019³¹⁴ in the population's support for EU integration. Thus, while the official communiques and the state's policies focused more on the relations with the East, the population expressed its willingness to strengthen the relations with the West. This proves that the public opinion was not influential in the foreign policy agenda during the presidency of Dodon. Therefore, the characteristics of the elite model were present during his term: media was used as an instrument that strengthened the political elites both nationally and internationally and focused on a single narrative decided by the government.³¹⁵

Opposingly, during the term of President Sandu, media was shaped more according to liberal views, since her position was pro-European: "I will be the president of the country's European integration, which will take the country out of international isolation and turn it back to external partners."³¹⁶ Most of President's Sandu agenda is focused on the European Union and the West, while the public opinion is still supporting the country's European integration.³¹⁷ At the same time, she declared that the foreign and domestic policies will complement each other in order to enhance the foreign investments and create more jobs.³¹⁸ Thus, the president's

³¹² The Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, "Igor Dodon had several informal discussions with heads of state and government" [in Romanian], Press Release, January 22, 2020, <https://presedinte.md/rom/presa/igor-dodon-a-avut-mai-multe-discutii-informale-cu-sefi-de-stat-si-guverne>

³¹³ Magenta Consulting, "The barometer of public opinion: The Republic of Moldova" [in Romanian], The Public Policy Institute, April 2017, 72.

³¹⁴ The Public Policy Institute, "The barometer of public opinion" [in Romanian], December 2019, 10.

³¹⁵ Smith, Hadfield and Dunne, 200.

³¹⁶ Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, "Inauguration speech of the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu," December 24, 2020, <https://presedinte.md/eng/comunicate-de-presa/discursul-inaugural-al-presedintelui-republicii-moldova-maia-sandu-92799>

³¹⁷ The Public Policy Institute, "The barometer of public opinion" [in Romanian], November 2022, 73.

³¹⁸ Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, "Inauguration speech of the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu."

approach was characterised by the pluralist model, because the public opinion was reflected in the policies of the government.

The presidency's official communiqués outlined all the formal and informal meetings of President Sandu with international leaders from both East and West, but the majority of encounters was with Western leaders. The difference between them and the one's issued during President Dodon was that these press statements were more detailed. Therefore, they outlined the significant meetings of President Sandu, not the short encounters with foreign officials.

The majority of the Moldovan mass-media outlets presented President's Sandu agenda from an objective view, without glorifying or condemning her actions. However, the pro-Russian media was subjectively presenting the news, saying that an autocratic regime is hiding behind the EU candidate (referring to President Sandu).³¹⁹ Consequently, it can be argued that the foreign policy of President Sandu was formulated in accordance with the public opinion that has access to independent media and pluralism of opinions, thus involving more sectors in the decision-making process.³²⁰

These models emphasise that the Moldovan Europeanisation process faced opposing approaches between 2017-2022. The differences between the regulations adopted by President Dodon and President Sandu point out that their main foreign policy focus was on the East and West, respectively. However, President Sandu directly expressed her pro-European approach, while President Dodon claimed he followed a balanced foreign policy. The timeline of events proved that during the term of President Dodon, the state made significant steps towards Europeanisation, but it also faced crucial political crises that negatively affected this process. On the one hand, the analysis of the TV channels proved that until 2019, more programmes furthered pro-Russian narratives. On the other hand, since 2019, the new AV Code modified the legislation and transposed significant European regulations. However, the new AV Code was adopted as a result of President Dodon's temporary suspension and the legislative support of the pro-Europeans. At the same time, the modifications of the AV Code that followed in the next years proved the interests of all political actors to broadcast or not, respectively, content from Russian producers. Thus, they intervened and debated the legislation on the AV services multiple times between 2017-2022, in order to determine what content should be available to the public. As a result, the population who preferred to inform from TV channels was prone to biased political content that influenced its opinion. Nevertheless, the empirical evidence shows

³¹⁹ KP.md, "Under the guise of an EU candidate, the autocratic regime of President Sandu is being formed" [in Russian], December 19, 2022, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.kp.md/daily/27485.5/4694808/>

³²⁰ Smith, Hadfield and Dunne, 200.

that the involvement of the pro-Russian and pro-European political classes in the mass-media sector was significant throughout the whole period of analysis and cannot be addressed only from the perspective of the presidential terms. In this regard, the final section highlights the effects of the Russian influence in mass-media on the Moldovan Europeanisation process by providing an overview of all the findings connected to the research question.

Conclusions

The expectations of the Republic of Moldova regarding the Europeanisation process, through ENP and other European plans and strategies, have been gradually developing until 2022. However, the process was affected by the peculiarities of the region, such as Russian soft power and the national political crises between 2017-2022. The post-soviet legacy and the pro-Russian politicians made the Republic of Moldova to be a favourable environment for the Russian soft power. Taking into account that there have been 32 years since its independence, the European soft power also implemented several mechanisms in the Eastern neighbourhood. Therefore, the Republic of Moldova has been consolidated from multiple directions and its complex political landscape is composed of supporters of both pro-Russian and pro-European narratives.

Considering the development of soft power and communications in the last century, this thesis analysed how did the Russian Federation influence the Moldovan mass-media and the process of Europeanisation between 2017-2022. Using televised programmes as an instrument for soft power, the Russian Federation spread the Russian language, culture and views of international politics. At the same time, this thesis demonstrated the power of political actors over the media legislation, broadcasted content and, implicitly, the public opinion. The media analysis proved that almost half of the most popular TV channels evidently supported a pro-Russian narrative, others furthered a balanced content, while others supported the pro-European politicians. Therefore, the political affiliation of the owners, together with their external links to Russian entities, strengthened the local pro-Russian narratives and the divisions in the civil society. At the same time, they played a significant role in influencing the legislative and the monitoring process of the AV services.

The timeline of events demonstrated the strong presence of Russian soft power in Moldovan mass-media. Between 2019-2021, the power of the pro-Russian political class was continuously decreasing. In 2019, after the government was not anymore led by PDM and Mr. Plahotniuc left the country, the power of the pro-Europeans and Ms. Sandu increased. As a result, it was also noticed an increase in the neutral narratives broadcasted by the TV channels. Thus, the impartiality and independence of mass-media was increasing and, implicitly, the Europeanisation process was progressing. However, the findings of this thesis prove that the pro-Russian channels continued to maintain their popularity among the Moldovan population even after the power of the pro-Russian political class decreased. Because of the institutional stalemate created by the previous governments until 2020 and the PSRM parliamentary

majority, President Sandu did not achieve many developments in the mass-media sector after the first year in office. The empirical findings showed that the mechanisms to reduce Russian influence in mass-media were improved after the 2021 snap parliamentary elections.

However, a significant factor that reinforced the bias of the news was the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022. The war did not only strengthen the influence of the pro-Russian TV channels, but it also affected the impartiality of other TV channels, which started to broadcast more pro-European narratives than neutral. Consequently, the effects of the Russian hard power in the neighbouring country had direct consequences over the effects of Russian soft power in the Republic of Moldova. Considering the pro-European approach of the Moldovan president and government regarding this situation, the effects of the Russian influence on Moldovan mass-media did not exceed the state of affairs from the previous years. The measures took to keep the influence under control included the reinforcement of the ECTT, the official approach towards disinformation and restricting the broadcasting of several pro-Russian TV channels. As a result, at the end of 2022, the Russian influence on Moldovan mass-media was the lowest from the entire analysed period. Accordingly, the Republic of Moldova made the most significant accomplishments in improving the AV regulations according to European standards and, so, advanced the Europeanisation process of the state.

Additionally, the findings on the ownership of the TV channels are important for answering the research question. Most of the owners of the pro-Russian TV channels left the country or were involved in corruption investigations until 2022. Moreover, their links with Russian entities had significant effects over both the TV content and the AV legislation. For example, Mr. Plahotniuc had an active involvement in both politics and TV until 2019. Some of his channels directly re-broadcasted Russian content and the 2022 investigations proved that he had links with a criminal organisation and had to face criminal liabilities in the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, he did not receive the same accusations as Mr. Șor and Mr. Chaika, who collaborated with the Russian government in undermining President Sandu. Furthermore, considering the accusations that the AV Council was not impartial in sanctioning the TV channels in some years, the assessment of Russian influence over the broadcasted content is not accurate. However, it is evident that, in 2022, the number of sanctions increased for most of the channels. This was mostly affected by the additional monitoring reports concerning the news related to the war in Ukraine, but also the new composition of the AV Council.

The findings regarding the Russian influence on the ownership and content of the Moldovan TV channels can be separated in two categories. The first one refers to the TV channels which are affiliated with political parties and their ownership is based on the similar

ideologies between the owners and foreign political actors (i.e. Prime TV, Publika TV, NTV Moldova, Jurnal TV). The content of these channels is created according to the political ideology of the owner(s), even if some channels promote it only in a subtle manner. As the results showed, both pro-Russian and pro-European TV channels have this kind of biased content and affiliation. However, the number of TV channels that further pro-Russian narratives is bigger and, consequently, the Russian influence over the public opinion is stronger. The Russian influence on these channels is managed by the owners, who are Russian-backed political actors from the Republic of Moldova and who depict it to the large public through TV channels, in order to increase their electorate.

The second category refers to the TV channels whose (beneficial) owners are originating from the EU or the Russian Federation (i.e. Primul în Moldova, RTR Moldova, ProTV Chişinău). Especially after the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the TV channels with foreign owners intensified the narratives that supported the Ukrainian or the Russian side, respectively. As the results showed, both of them were sanctioned for not respecting the principle of impartiality. However, the number of pro-Russian channels that broadcasted biased informative content was higher and the re-broadcasted content directly from the Russian government threatened the independence of freedom of speech in Moldovan mass-media. Thus, these narratives prevent the development of independent media, which should not be pressured by any local or foreign political entity. Therefore, the thesis concludes that the foreign influence on the public's opinion realised through TV channels is limiting the prospects of Moldovan Europeanisation.

From the perspective of the pluralist and elite model, the thesis delineated that the different approaches of the two presidents and their governments affected the favourable conditions for a successful Russian soft power and the development of the Europeanisation process. The Russian soft power exerted during the term of President Dodon successfully contributed to the rapprochement of the Republic of Moldova to the Russian Federation. However, not only the president's approach facilitated this outcome, but also the power of the entire pro-Russian political class from the Republic of Moldova. Both in the legislation concerning media and in the media outlets themselves there was a particular attitude that promoted biased information, which influenced the public opinion and increased the pro-Russian electorate. However, the amount of pro-Russian narratives and the sanctions against them was different every year. The factors that led to these differences were the new and more limiting AV regulations, as well as the changes of governments.

Significantly, the findings on the evolution of the Moldovan AV legislation proved that the progress of Europeanisation was influenced by the priorities of each government, but it was not completely dependent on it. Even if pro-Russian narratives dominated the TV content until 2019, there was an increase in the population's trust in European media sources rather than Russian ones. Furthermore, the findings of this thesis prove that there have been significant legislative developments made towards Europeanisation during that period, mostly due to the increasing involvement and public support for the pro-European political actors. The most significant improvement was the adoption of a new AV Code in 2019 that diminished the monopoly of certain mass-media outlets, required the transparency of ownership and imposed more guidelines on the pluralism of opinions. These regulations were very important for the Moldovan Europeanisation process. Furthermore, the Republic of Moldova did not halt its partnerships with EU at any moment between 2017-2022. Many Action Plans and strategies were successfully implemented throughout the whole period. However, the pace of the progress was slowed down by the pro-Russian political class.

Thus, the main findings prove a significant presence of both Russian and European soft power, which developed concurrently between 2017-2022. Their progress depended on the local support and legitimacy of the pro-Russian and pro-European parties. This political division drove the policy-making process in two different directions, which resulted in improvements towards the Europeanisation process on the one side and an increased Russian soft power on the other. Consequently, this thesis demonstrated that the evolution of the Moldovan Europeanisation process in the sphere of media until 2022 consisted of an increased presence of Russian soft power mechanisms, but a decrease of their effectiveness, due to the modifications in the TV channel's ownerships and in the AV legislation.

The civil society was significantly involved in managing the democratisation and Europeanisation process of mass-media. This conclusion is based on the fact that a significant amount of data and sources used for the case study were collected from independent or non-governmental organisations. These entities realised many surveys and campaigns to analyse the rates of disinformation and propaganda in the Republic of Moldova. However, considering the period analysed in this research, President Dodon was in power for most of the time. Since his government collaborated more with Russia than the EU, this is one of the explanations for the lack of state mechanisms to strengthen the information security space. At the same time, it is important to notice that many legislative initiatives dated from 2017-2018. However, the progress of implementation was slow and frequently blocked by the centre left-wing parties. The developments were not generated by governmental initiatives, but rather by the pressures

coming from the civil society. Thus, it is important to mention that these initiatives were in cooperation with the local non-governmental organisations and in partnership with the EU.

In addition, the evaluation of the Freedom House reports on the democratisation of the Republic of Moldova helped in drawing the final the conclusions of this research. Media pluralism, independence and transparency, the free access to information and respecting the cultural realm are the main elements present in both European and Moldovan media regulations. Accordingly, these are the main values of a democratic society. The Republic of Moldova did not become a fully consolidated democracy until 2022. The European institutions closely monitored the evolution of Moldovan politics and advocated their concern regarding the democratic developments of the state between 2017-2022. For this reason, the funding was not constant and the implementation of policies was slowed down in some periods. Importantly, despite the opposed views of the political class, the development of Europeanisation was considered as an important point on the agendas of all the governments. Therefore, the Republic of Moldova is, *de jure*, proceeding towards the European path, but, *de facto*, it needs to work on the suitable mechanisms that can make an actual change in the system, which is still under the influence of Russian soft power and the post-soviet legacy.

Nevertheless, the main findings of this thesis contribute to the general literature on soft power, by underlining that the strategy of Russian soft power in the Republic of Moldova relies on the power of information. The TV channels of Moldovan influential political actors are used as instruments within the Russian soft power strategy, in order to share information that improves the public opinion about Russian culture and politics. The approach of using media analysis to investigate the effects of soft power can be applied to other post-soviet states that are still under the Russian sphere of influence, in order to compare their evolutions. Employing this method in other cases is important for a better understanding of media influence, which is a crucial phenomenon that will continue to evolve in the digitalisation era.

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Appendix A

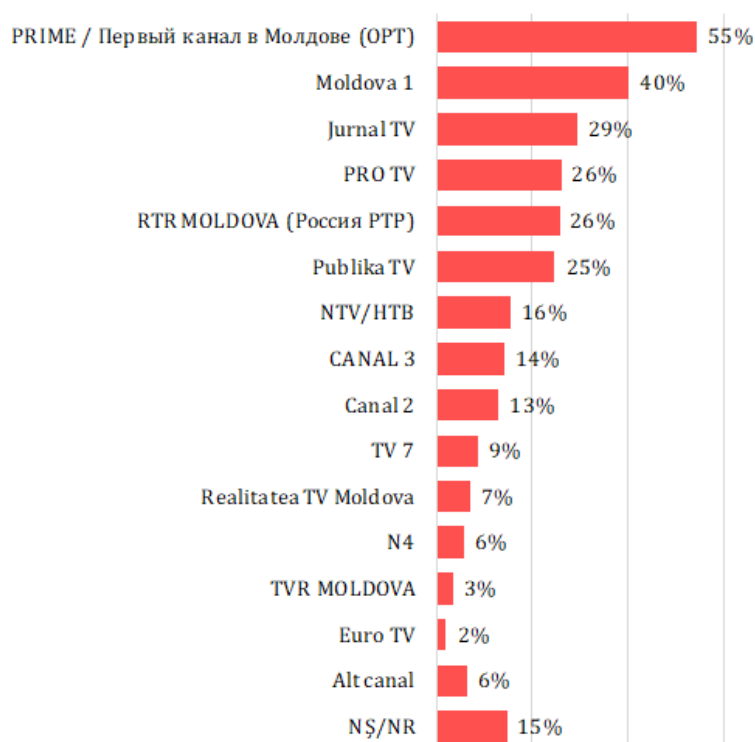
The most popular news TV channels in the Republic of Moldova in 2017

35

BOP – aprilie 2017

Distribuția răspunsurilor la întrebarea:

Spuneți-mi vă rog, care sunt principalele trei canale TV, de unde primiți informație/vă informați?



Respondenți care au indicat "TV" drept sursă de informare, N=910

Figure A1. "Which are the first three TV channels from where you get your information?"

Note: The Public Policy Institute, "The barometer of public opinion: The Republic of Moldova" [in Romanian], April 2017, 35.

Appendix A - Continuation

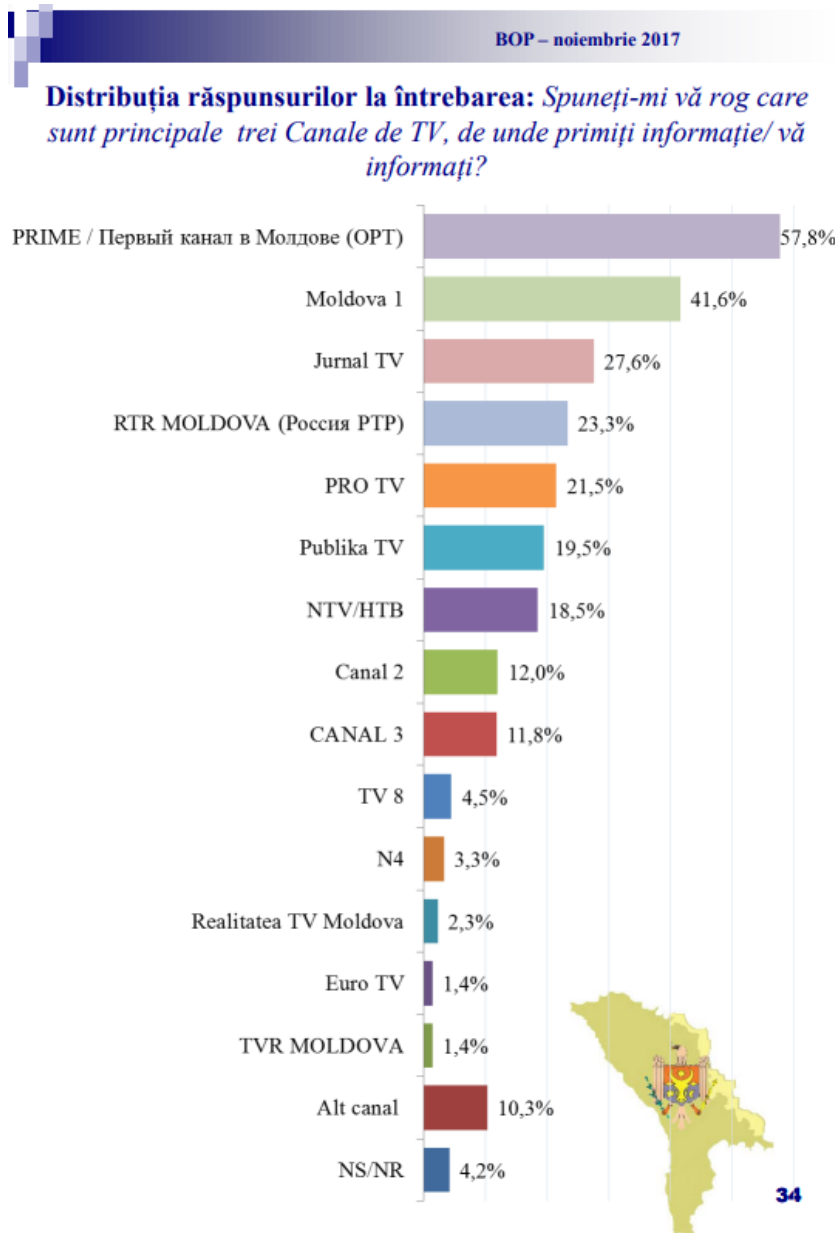


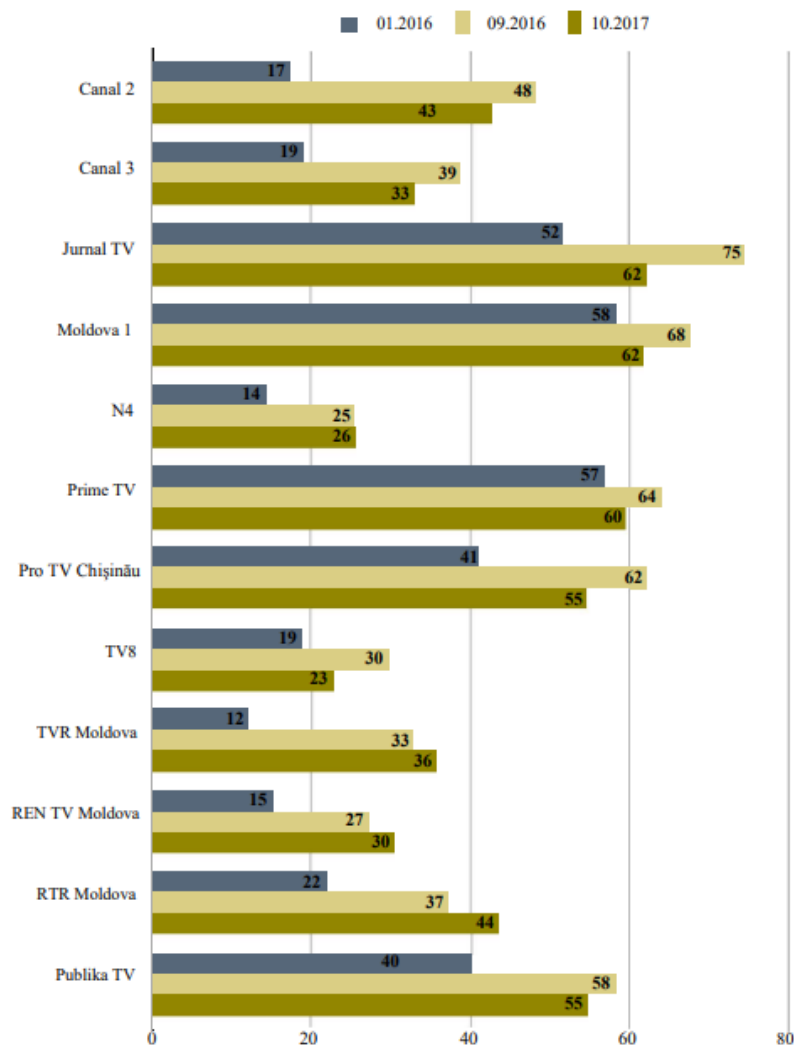
Figure A2. “Which are the first three TV channels from where you get your information?”

Note: The Public Policy Institute, “The barometer of public opinion: The Republic of Moldova” [in Romanian], November 2017, 34.

Appendix A – Continuation

Q16 —

Dvs. obișnuiți să urmăriți jurnale de știri difuzate de ...?



percepția populației privind informațiile false și distorsionate din mass media octombrie 2017 | pagina 46

Figure A3. “You usually watch the news bulletins broadcasted by...”

Note: Doru Petruți, Viorelia Zaharco, Alexandru Crivițchi, “Population’s perception regarding false and distorted information from mass media” [in Romanian], Center for Independent Journalism (CJI), October 2017, 46.

Appendix B

The most popular news TV channels in the Republic of Moldova in 2021

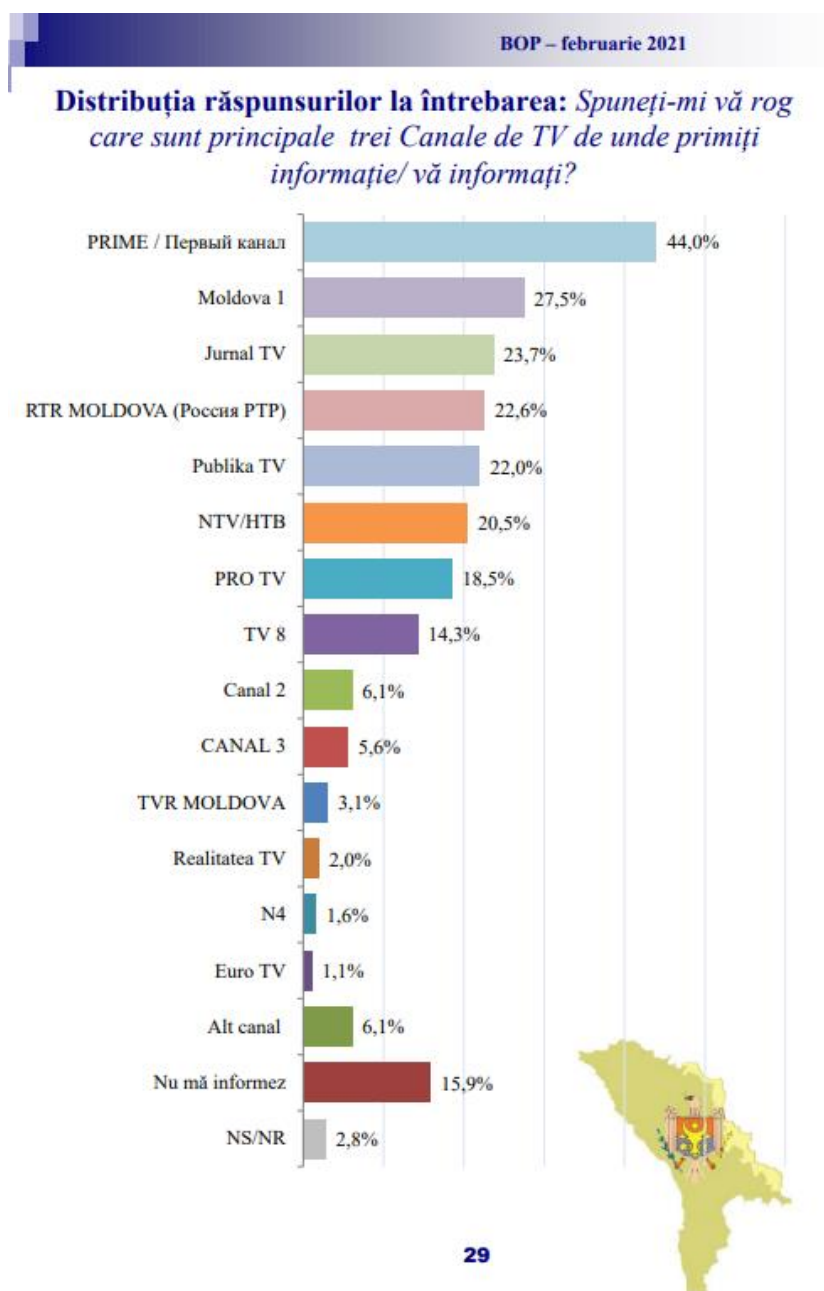


Figure B1. “Which are the first three TV channels from where you get information?”

Note: The Public Policy Institute, “The barometer of public opinion: The Republic of Moldova” [in Romanian], February 2021, 29.

Appendix B - Continuation

Figura 18. Care sunt principalele trei canale TV, de unde PRIMIȚI INFORMAȚIE/vă informați?, %, N=1032. În primul rând, în al doilea rând și în al treilea rând.

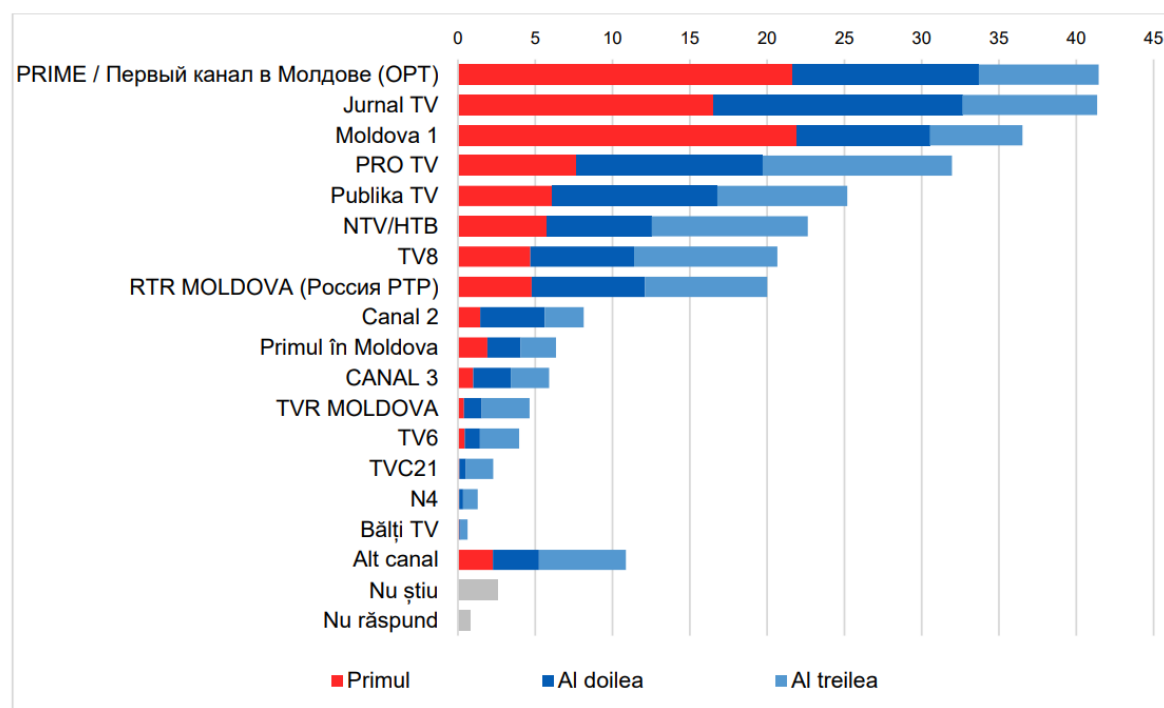
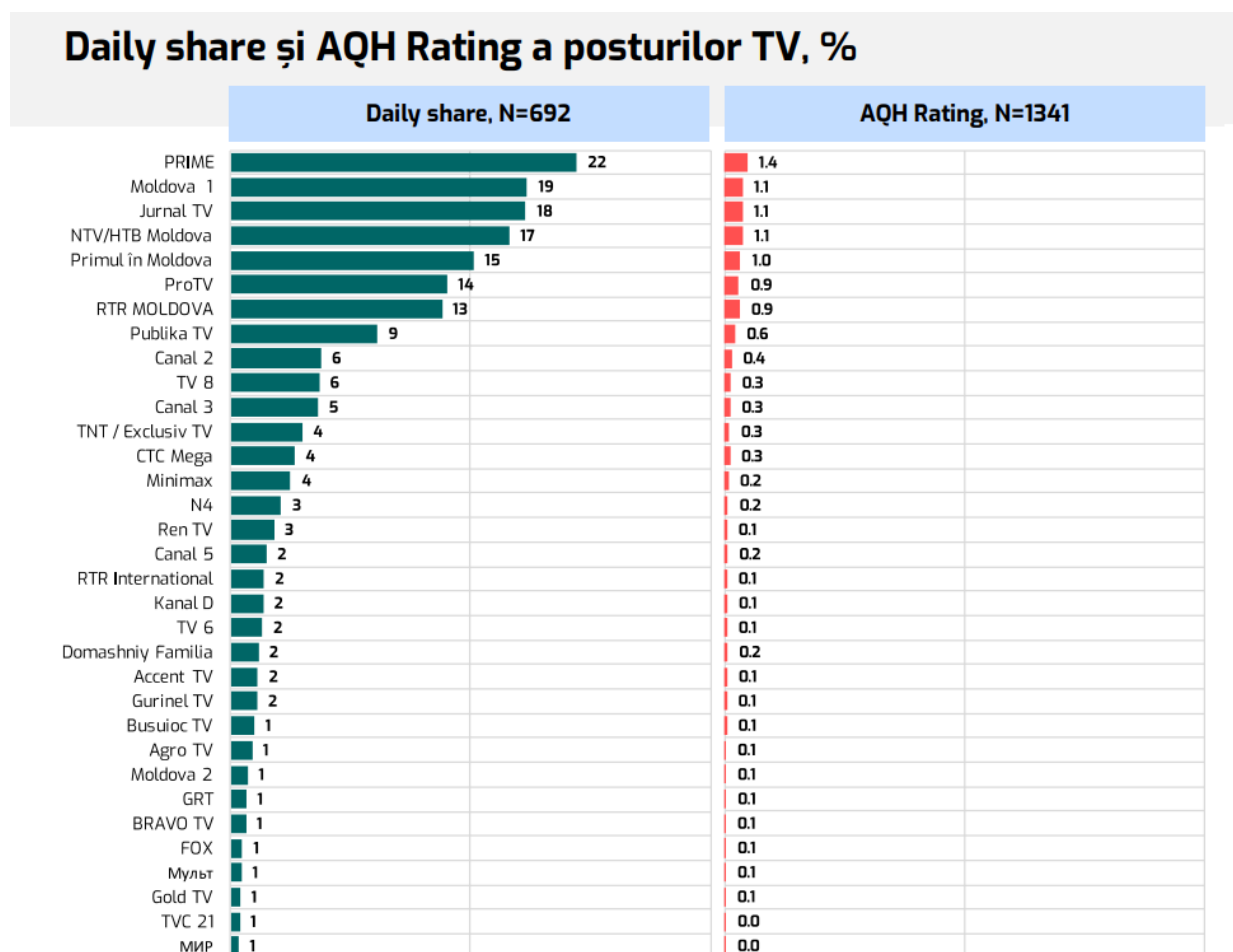


Figure B2. “Which are the first three TV channels from where you get information?”

Note: The Public Policy Institute, “The barometer of public opinion: The Republic of Moldova” [in Romanian], June 2021, 13.

Appendix B - Continuation



7. Ce canal dvs. ați urmărit ieri în următoarele intervale de timp? (un răspuns posibil pentru fiecare interval)

Figure B3. “Daily Share and AQH Rating of the TV channels”

Note: Magenta Consulting, “National study of the mass-media audience” [in Romanian], Center for Independent Journalism (CJI), December 2021, 17.

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