



median  
research  
centre

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Annual Report

2018

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MEDIAN RESEARCH CENTRE

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# WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DID

Median Research Centre (MRC) is an independent, non-profit organisation. Through our research and public information activities, we aim ultimately to contribute to improvements in the quality of democracy and governance. We use the latest theoretical advances and research methods to explore pressing issues of contemporary society and to pursue practical applications for scientific advances; we seek to enhance public understanding of current issues, by bringing insights from social sciences to a wider audience. MRC taps into the skills and knowledge of researchers, professors and experts with academic training and/or professional experience in universities in Belgium, Canada, Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Romania, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Our staff's areas of expertise include: public opinion, media, elections, political representation, political institutions, social policy, political economy and more generally, the quality of democracy.

We focus on issues related to: intolerant and anti-democratic attitudes and their manifestations (particularly online), information provision, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, citizen involvement, political accountability and substantive representation, and media and user engagement by online media outlets.

Our main research activities in 2018 focused on the examination of the media landscape in Romania and other European media systems, the analysis of how EU-related topics are covered in the media in different countries, and the ongoing study of the expression of intolerant and anti-democratic attitudes and interaction between participants in online comment sections. We also continued to work on leveraging our research insights and social science knowledge into user-friendly toolkits and short pieces aimed at both expert and broad audiences.

# KEY ACHIEVEMENTS IN 2018



**200,000** page views of our online content across websites

**100,000** sessions across our websites



**3** research reports

**4<sup>th</sup>** year in a row



**country rapporteur for the Media Pluralism Monitor,** commissioned by the European Commission in 30 countries



**24** analyses published across multiple platforms

**9** OpenPolitics newsletters sent out to a growing base of subscribers



# YEAR IN REVIEW

## IMPLEMENTED PROJECTS

In 2018, our team focused most of its research efforts in the area of media and user engagement. We wrapped up our work on the multi-year EUENGAGE research project, completing two reports on media coverage of the EU and EU-related issues in 30 European outlets. We also continued assessing the media environment in Romania for the EU-wide Media Pluralism Monitor project.

In parallel, though facing more limited resources than in the past, we went forward with our plans to continue analysing the rich data – including but not limited to online comments - collected as part of the “Less Hate, More Speech” project, completed in 2017. In particular, we focused on producing guides for media outlets or other practitioners interested in audience engagement or online communities, based on our research findings and our insights from the collaboration with our media partners in the project (GSP.ro, Tolo.ro, Blogsport.ro and Paginademedi.ro).

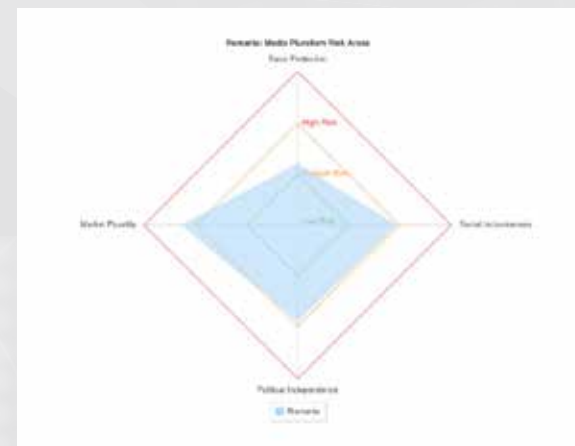
Additionally, on OpenPolitics.ro and in the OpenPolitics newsletter, we continued to produce short explanatory pieces that try to contextualize important events and identify and analyse the key issues they raise in a systematic manner, informed by our social science knowledge.

# MEDIA PLURALISM MONITOR (MPM)

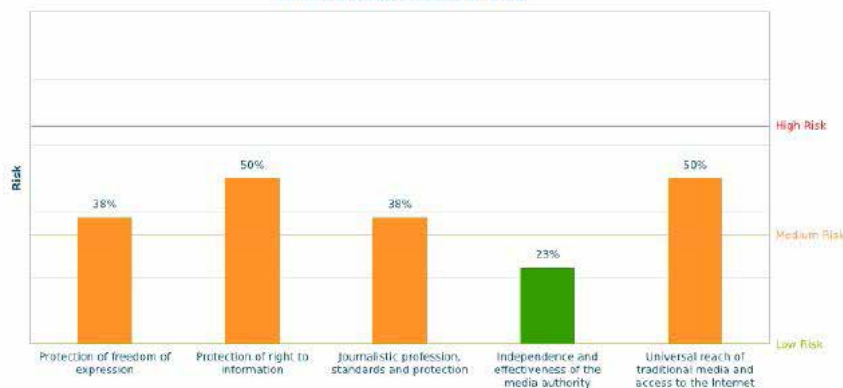
This year we continued to contribute research to the Media Pluralism Monitor, an annually updated tool that assesses the risk to media plurality in several European countries. This is the fourth year we examined the media landscape and risks to media pluralism in Romania as part of this EU-wide project, coordinated by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF) at the European University Institute (EUI).

For this edition, we re-examined the situation in Romania with regard to 200 indicators, which relate to the protection of media pluralism and media freedom, the political independence of news outlets, market plurality and the social inclusiveness of the media sector.

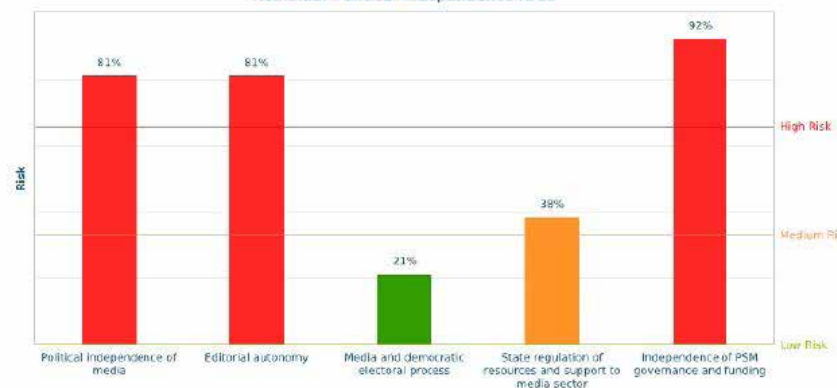
We found no major shifts compared to the situation in the previous year, but we did observe increased polarization and politicization of mainstream media, which impacts the quality of the journalistic product delivered to the public. The lack of viable business models among mainstream media and the precariousness of the journalistic profession are among the key risk factors that compound each other and do not have easy solutions, but the report we produced nevertheless outlines some areas where there is a chance of impactful reform.



**Romania: Basic Protection Area**



**Romania: Political Independence Area**



Media Pluralism Monitor  
Monitoring risks for Media Pluralism in EU Member States

# EUENGAGE 2018

This was the final year of implementation of the EUENGAGE research project, which used a multi-dimensional and multi-method approach to explore how better links between supranational EU governance and popular mobilisation at the national level would be possible.

MRC was part of a large consortium of partners within this project, which was financed through the Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme.

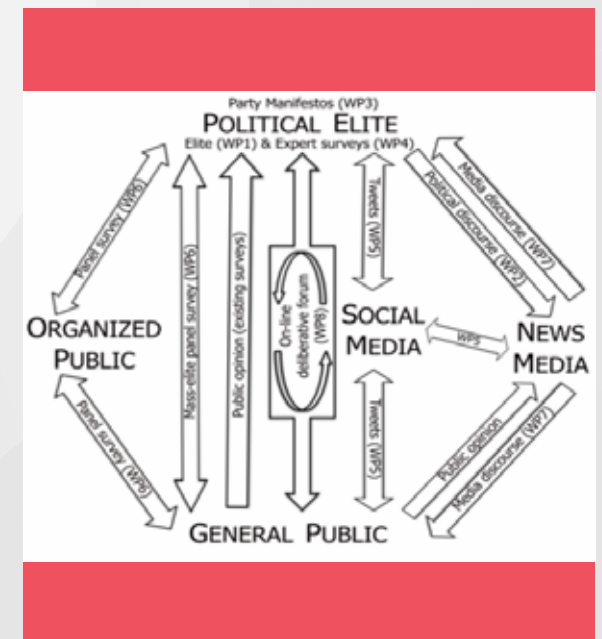
MRC's role in the EUENGAGE project was to carry out a systematic mass media content analysis of 30 of the most prominent news outlets in 10 European countries. By means of automated text analysis, the study examined how the press in different countries prioritises and frames controversial European-level topics like Brexit, immigration, economy and security, and how the EU is depicted when the media approaches these topics.

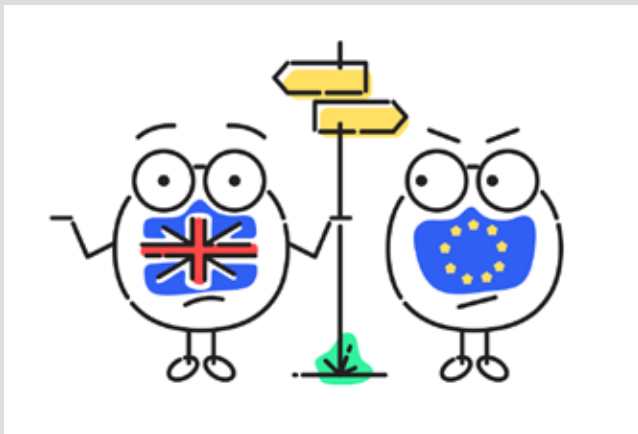
In 2018, we published two reports based on our analysis, and we also shared on our website the data used for the analyses. The first report, based on an analysis of media coverage in 30 of the most prominent media outlets in 10 European countries between February 2016 and February 2017, highlights that the EU and its institutions or its leading figures tended to be most frequently brought up with regard to Brexit, and least frequently when it came to national security and the economy. Usually, the broad spectre of the EU was

invoked, but when specific institutions were mentioned, it was most frequently the Commission, followed by the European Central Bank, the latter most notably in articles related to the economy. We also examined the framing of the Brexit issue and found that the former was covered primarily as a story about the economy, followed by a focus on British politics and border issues.

The second report focused on the tone of coverage about the EU and its potential relationship to citizen and elite views on European affairs. It was based on coverage in 30 outlets in 10 EU member states between January and October 2016. We found that in most countries, the tone of EU-related coverage could not be said to be mostly positive or mostly negative; but Germany and the Netherlands stood out with a predominantly positive tone, while the United Kingdom had rather more negative coverage in the run-up to the Brexit referendum. National differences in coverage can be observed, but by comparison to these cross-national differences, there is much less distinction in tone within countries (between outlets). The evidence we were able to gather also points to the conclusion that the mass media have their own take on European topics, as the sentiment our text analysis captured in their coverage does not appear systematically linked to the opinions of business or political elites, as captured by EUENGAGE project surveys. The analysis suggests that mass media is not in sync at the aggregate level with either public opinion

or elite opinions - which does not mean that the media cannot be affected by (or affect) citizen or elite views at the individual levels (or other levels of aggregation). Taken together, these findings do, however, provide evidence in line with theories and previous empirical work that highlighted the existence of a distinct media or journalistic logic and news values that inform content and tone.





## OpenPolitics.ro

In 2018 we continued to develop OpenPolitics.ro, a platform aimed at a broad, non-academic audience that hosts analyses and debates informed by social science, on key political and policy topics. This year we published 10 analyses, tackling timely issues like Brexit and elections in the United States, as well as broader topics such as institutional racism and sexism in media coverage of female athletes. We also expanded the reach of the OpenPolitics newsletter, which every

month delivers brief but contextualized explanations on a handful of important topics, as well as carefully curated recommendations of visual, audio or written journalistic or academic products.

## A toolkit for online comments

We also developed a toolkit for online outlets that may want to retain a comment section but face limited resources to develop a strategy for handling the comments, as well as for anyone else interested in managing and engaging with online comments and commenters. It is based on our experience developing community rules and comment moderation procedures for several websites we partnered with in the research project “Less Hate, More Speech” (GSP.ro, Tolo.ro, Blogspot.ro and Paginademedia.ro). In all, we published 9 guides wherein we share

simple recommendations and insights from our research and practice. They cover topics such as how to think about the principles and the goals of comment moderation on one’s website, how to get the comment moderators involved in the process of drawing up the community rules, what comment section experiments one may engage in to encourage more civil and thoughtful contributions, and how to get the community involved in the process.





# EVENTS

In 2018 we participated in several academic conferences and workshops. In January we kickstarted the year with a presentation at the International Workshop on Measuring Euroscepticism, hosted at the Unitelma Sapienza University of Rome as part of the EUENGAGE project. The team presented some of the results of our text analysis of coverage in 30 European outlets, presenting the working paper titled “Which Eye of the Beholder? How the EU is Covered by European Newspapers”.

In May, MRC was present at the 2018 World Media Economics and Management Conference in Cape Town, South Africa. There, we presented a paper examining how media outlets can maintain core professional standards and stay profitable in the Romanian context, which is marked on the one hand by the technological disruptions that media worldwide face, and on the other hand, by additional factors – a small market with significant risks in terms of plurality, protections for journalists and independence from political interference. To examine the challenges and strategic options faced by media outlets in such a context, the paper used the cases of Gazeta Sporturilor, Romania’s largest sports newspaper, and Tolo.ro, the public affairs blog of its then-editor-in-chief.

Later in the year, results from the “Less Hate, More Speech” research project were featured in a presentation at the EAI Dilemma Workshop on Political Representation in Divided Societies in Brussels, where the paper “Manufacturing tolerance? Political discourse, electoral campaigns and the expression of inclusive, pro-minority views” was presented in November.

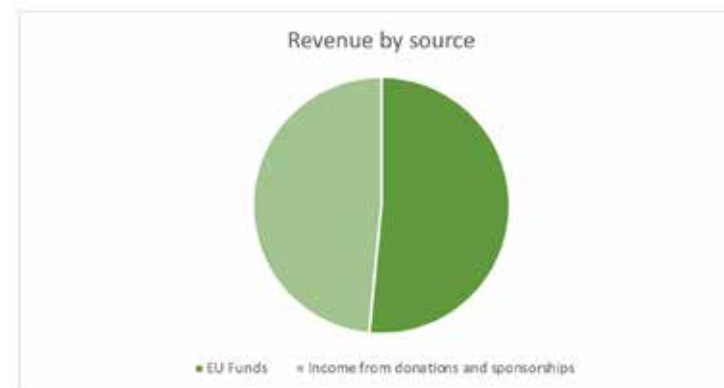


*World Media Economics and Management Conference in Cape Town, South Africa*

# FINANCIAL RESULTS

Revenue by source	LEI	EURO	%
EU Funds	101,821.00	21,831.73	51.5
Income from donations and sponsorships	95,861.00	20,553.83	48.5
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>197,682.00</b>	<b>42,385.56</b>	<b>100</b>

Expenses	LEI	EURO	%
Personnel costs	177,375.00	38,031.48	76
Subcontracting	15,468.00	3,319.53	7
Marketing	832.00	178.55	0
Travel	10,488.00	2,250.79	5
Overhead	28,048.00	6,019.27	12
<b>Total expenses</b>	<b>232,211.00</b>	<b>49,799.62</b>	<b>100</b>



Income and expenditure	LEI	EURO
Total income	197,682.00	42,385.56
Total expenditure	232,211.00	49,799.62
<b>Deficit</b>	<b>34,529.00</b>	<b>7,414.06</b>

Balance Sheet	LEI	EURO
Total assets	33,196.00	7,117.65
Total liabilities	49,799.00	10,677.54
<b>Net assets</b>	<b>16,603.00</b>	<b>3,656.16</b>

# MANAGEMENT

## CORE TEAM

Board Members: **Borbála Kovács, Gabor Tóka, Marina Popescu**

President & Founder: **Marina Popescu**

Executive Director: **Roxana Bodea**

Chief Accountant: **Elena Buzatu**

Senior Researchers: **Tania Chilin, Oana Lup, Adina Marincea, Robert Sata, Raluca Toma**

Junior Researchers: **Nathaniel Brophy, Cristina Mihalachi, Laura Trandafir**

Designer: **Nicoleta Nasta**

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**Marina Popescu**  
President & Founder



**Gabor Tóka**  
Board Member



**Borbála Kovács**  
Board Member



**Roxana Bodea**  
Executive Director



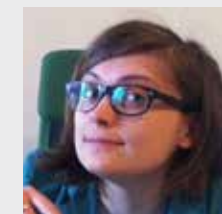
**Tania Chilin**  
Senior Researcher



**Robert Sata**  
Senior Researcher



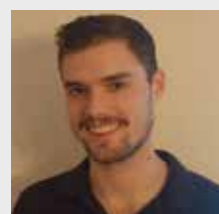
**Oana Lup**  
Senior Researcher



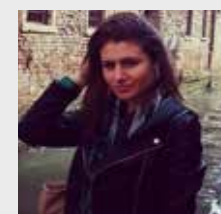
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Junior Researcher



**Cristina Mihalachi**  
Junior Researcher



**Laura Trandafir**  
Junior Researcher



**Elena Buzatu**  
Chief Accountant



**Nicoleta Nasta**  
Designer