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Annual Report

# 2016

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MEDIAN RESEARCH CENTRE

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# WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DID

Median Research Centre (MRC) is an independent, non-profit organization. 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 sub-

stantive representation, and media and user engagement by online media outlets. Our main research activities in 2016 focussed on the study of intolerant and anti-democratic attitudes and online comments; media outlets' engagement with the audience and the content it generates; the media landscape in Romania and the situation of the public broadcaster TVR; as well as political representation by members of parliament and elections, in the context of the 2016 parliamentary vote.

## Public opinion

Over the past few years there has been increased concern in many countries regarding growing political polarization and the intolerance of difference, whether based on skin colour, national origin, sexual orientation or other aspects that can divide people into in-groups and out-groups, including socio-economic status and political views. While more open borders, greater economic interdependence and the Internet have provided opportunities for different people to interact or work together, they have also brought fresh ways for people to clash with those they do not see eye to eye with, to isolate themselves in echo chambers or to target each other. Defending and promoting the values of equality,

mutual respect and civil engagement with the other is essential to maintain a well-functioning democracy. But to do this effectively it is necessary to understand where intolerance comes from, how it manifests itself and why. We see it as part of our mission to contribute to a better understanding of intolerant and anti-democratic attitudes and their manifestation and to employ rigorous scientific examination to explore (new) ways of promoting mutual tolerance and the acceptance of democratic norms.

Thus, in 2016, we continued work on a project we began in 2014, entitled 'Less Hate, More Speech: An Experimental and Comparative Study in Media and Political Elites' Ability to Nurture Civil, Tolerant, Pro-Democratic Citizens,' (LHMS) funded through the EEA Financial Mechanism and implemented in partnership with the Central European University and the University of Bergen. The work of MRC and its partners in Norway provides insight into human mechanisms and behaviours that are universal, but, through its comparative dimensions, it also promises to shed light on what these phenomena look like in two different societies - one with much more deeply and widely engendered norms of equality than the other - as well as why certain stark differences occur and what this also tells us about

the prospects change towards the better.

Among other activities in this area, in 2016 we completed a national representative survey, deployed online experiments during the campaign for the parliamentary elections and attended two international conferences to present papers based on the data we collected, examining intolerant attitudes towards Romanian minority groups and asylum seekers, respectively.

## Media and user engagement by online media

Traditional outlets are facing significant and well-documented challenges, including decreased subscription and advertising revenue, partly due to the erosion of trust in the media and the migration of audiences to alternative news sources. Increased financial liability, smaller newsrooms and fewer resources threaten the media's ability to adequately perform its essential role in a democracy: to inform, educate and serve as a watchdog. Some of the audience, for its part, appears by turns increasingly sceptical of the mainstream media's methods - and its tropes - and more vulnerable to misinformation or exaggeration.

To meet these challenges, some outlets, especially in Western Europe and the United States, are finding creative ways to generate revenue, produce and package content and engage with their audience, in order to build a relationship that can engender trust and loyalty.

Meanwhile, the media context in Romania is, in many ways, more challenging than in other European countries. The media landscape is highly polarized and split along partisan lines; consumption of print outlets and media literacy are both extremely low; the public broadcaster's viewership is dwindling; media business models are unsustainable; and outlets have been particularly hard hit by the decline in advertising revenue in recent years. Journalists themselves have both little training and an exceedingly precarious position in the workplace, lacking basic protections and with virtually no institution or mechanism in place to defend their interests or to enforce basic journalistic norms.

In this context, MRC has continued its media-related work in 2016, including performing the research and writing for the Romania-focussed section of the 30-country Media Pluralism Monitor for the second year in a row. We also published an extensive report on the vulnerable position of Romanian public broadcaster TVR, which explained the root causes of issues like its current state of indebtedness, questionable political independence and low viewership rates and put the legislative and institutional architecture around TVR in a wider European context. As part of the afore mentioned 'Less Hate, More Speech' project, we have also continued experiments with comment moderation on national Romanian websites - effectively a real-world experiment concerning how norms can be developed and enforced in the online environment, which sheds light both on how the media can perform its gate-keeping function in the digital age and on some potentially effective ways of countering hate speech, intolerance and incivility online.

## Political representation and elections

Political representation was another key focus of MRC's research in 2016, which saw the conclusion of a multi-year project studying the connection between how candidates for Parliament campaign and the promises they make to their potential constituents and their later behaviour once they are elected. Whether there is a link between campaigns and legislative behaviour is a fundamental question for the functioning of democracy, since democratic representation is based on the expectation of a (significant degree of) congruence between electoral promises and subsequent actions.

However, the relationship between these two is likely to be influenced by factors like the personalisation of campaigns. The project 'Rethinking individual representation: Campaign Personalization and Legislative Behaviour' made significant contributions to our understanding of this relationship, and 2016 saw the publication of a paper, together with the acceptance of a further three for publication, and the organization of a workshop in Bucharest, attended by local and international academics and experts.

In the run-up to and aftermath of the local and parliamentary elections taking place in 2016, we published multiple analyses on issues such as: the reorientation of (then-) MPs towards local races; the selection criteria parties used to nominate candidates on party lists for the parliamentary elections; the plausibility of fraud allegations in the Bucharest elections; the main issues and party positions of the parties prior to the parliamentary elections, and other timely topics.

# MILESTONES

## 2004

One of the first big grants MRC received for the 'Personalization as a goal of electoral reform' project, granted by the International Policy Fellowship Program of the Open Society Institute, Budapest.

## 2007

First time MRC was part of a European funded project - Eurequal, 'focussed on the inequalities in post-communist societies and their impact on the consolidation of democracy.'

## 2008

TestVot, the only voting advice application in Romania to be present at each election, was launched with the aim to develop the civic participation in Moldova and Romania, through innovative online tools based on research.

## 2009

MRC became part of an international consortium focussed on 'the deliberative civic involvement in the decision-making process in the EU', through the Europolis project.

## 2012

MRC launched OpenPolitics.ro, an online platform of debates and political analyses, just in time to provide important information on party promises and in-depth studies on topics high on the public agenda during the parliamentary elections.

## 2014

MRC won a 800,000 euro grant for a three-year research project called Less Hate, More Speech to 'examine the role political elites and mass media play, intentionally or unintentionally, in reducing or promoting anti-democratic and intolerant discourse among the citizens.' It also launched Parliament Transparent, an online tool for monitoring MPs activities.

## 2015

MRC won three more projects, two of which were funded by the Civil Society Development Foundation and one as part of an international consortium in a three-year project called EUENGAGE.

# KEY ACHIEVEMENTS IN 2016



250,000

page views of our online content across websites

1 REPRESENTATIVE NATIONAL SURVEY

TestVot was filled out over

25,000

times before the parliamentary elections



1 MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT SURVEY



100

articles published across multiple platforms

240



NGOs and experts enrolled in an online database

13

events organised



6

research reports

10

conference presentations of MRC, its projects and research papers



7

OpenPolitics newsletters sent out to subscribers



1

camp for 50 middle school and high school students and teachers

# YEAR IN REVIEW

## IMPLEMENTED PROJECTS

Over the past year we have been implementing important organisational changes at all levels to reflect the constantly growing number of projects we developed and in order to better cover the research areas of interest to us. Our belief is that these changes are enabling us to become a more solid organisation with a greater reach, as well as to be more prepared to devise, act and react.

Thus, the organisation has been focussed on both research and NGO-related projects. Often, the research we did on one side has been used as input on the other side, enabling us to spread our resources efficiently to complement our overall work. This is why we have developed and sought financing for projects that fit this logic, while staying true to our mission and principles.

Even when financing was not available for all our research work, we diligently took steps to ensure that we contributed our expertise in respect of several topics that were high on the public agenda, including the extensive work we did around the parliamentary elections and the broad range of work carried out in relation to the predicament of the Romanian Public Broadcaster.

Public opinion, media and user engagement, along with elections and political representation

were the main research areas over the year and several of our projects were at the crossroads between these thematic areas.

The rest of the report provides more detailed information on all our projects, outcomes and work we have done over the past year.

### MEDIA PLURALISM MONITOR

2016 was the second year during which we carried out research for Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM), a useful tool that assesses the risk to media plurality in several European countries.

The documentation process dealt with 200 indicators that relate to the protection of media pluralism and media freedom, the political independence, the market plurality and the social inclusiveness of the Romanian media sector.

The research that covered 2015 showed high risks for most countries, including Romania, in relation to the concentration of cross-media ownership, media literacy, political interference in controlling media ownership, the independence of the public service media and even the protection of journalists.

All of our findings on Romania and the impact of the local context on the research results were discussed at a public event on 27 April at the Representation of the European Commission in Romania, where over 30 stakeholders (journalists, media experts etc.) were present.

MPM is an annual project, co-financed by the European Commission and coordinated by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF) at the European University Institute (EUI).

### EUENGAGE 2016

2016 was also the second year for our implementation of the EUENGAGE research project, which uses 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.

To develop these ideas, the project first builds an understanding of the behaviour of all actors involved: political and business elites, citizens, political parties and mass media. In charge of the latter, over the course of 2016, we collected a large amount of data from 30 different media outlets in ten European countries on four topics: Brexit, immigration, economy and security. Based

on these data, we have been analysing the way the EU was reflected in these media, what the differences in how these topics were presented across these countries and media outlets were, and to what extent the EU is an actor that speaks or is spoken about. The final analyses are due in 2018.

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

### **Analysis of the situation of the Romanian public television channel between 1989 and 2016**

Our media experts produced a thorough analysis of the dire situation of the public television channel (TVR) in Romania, just as the subject came back onto the public agenda in March 2016. The aim was to identify the main factors (financial, legislative, role of public media) that led to TVR becoming broke and obsolete and what measures to restore its mission could yield better results in the long run.

Our findings demonstrated that the most crucial component for the performance and independence of the Romanian public service media was the ambiguous legislative framework relating to the dismissal of the board. The rules regarding dismissal, as well as parliamentary oversight, are a text-book negative case: short term mandates, due to the ease with which the board can be dismissed following parliamentary rejection of the annual report, without any evaluation nor even taking into

account official reports of other state agencies/institutions.

### **Rethinking individual representation**

2016 was the final year for the 'Rethinking individual representation: Campaign Personalization and Legislative Behaviour' research project in which two senior MRC researchers were involved.

The project explored the links between candidates' election campaigns and their legislative behaviour. The former was analysed via a Candidate Survey of the politicians running for office in the 2012 parliamentary elections. The latter focussed on roll-call voting loyalty and local interest representation via constituency-oriented parliamentary questions. Beyond the candidate survey data and the legislative behaviour data, the project members also created a unique, matched data set of candidates running for office in parliamentary elections in Romania from 1992 to 2012.

In 2016, MRC members published, using data from this project, an academic article in the journal *Problems of Post-communism*, while three other articles were accepted for publication in *Social Science Quarterly*, *Government and Opposition* and *Ask: Research and Methods*. Overall, at the end of this project, nine academic articles and two book chapters had been published or accepted for publication, while two other articles were in review at top ISI journals and a final volume was being prepared for submission to a major publishing house.

On September 26, 2016, we organized the proj-

ect's final workshop in Bucharest, at which we presented and discussed our research findings with 15 academics affiliated with universities and research institutes in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Italy, Croatia and Romania, including some leading experts on voting behaviour and representation. Staff from the European Commission Representation in Romania and from several embassies also attended the event.

This was a four-year research project, coordinated by Marina Popescu in partnership with the Lucian Blaga University Sibiu and funded by the Romanian National Science Foundation, CNCSIS-UEFIS-CDI. The total budget amounted to approximately 260,000 EUR.

### **OpenPolitics.ro**

For the second time in a row, since its launch in 2012, the OpenPolitics.ro platform provided extensive materials, this time related to the 2016 parliamentary campaign: expert analyses on the main parties' policy pledges and summaries of these pledges on 10 major public policy domains (the economy, health care, education, the labour market, agriculture, energy, pensions, institutional design, EU funds and family welfare policies).

Prior to the parliamentary elections, we also published a series of articles focussing on the local elections that took place in June 2016. Some of these articles shed light on the candidates and party recruitment strategies, while others were quantitative analyses of vote fraud suspicions in one particular contest - the mayoral elections in District 1 of Bucharest.

## TestVot

During the campaign for the 2016 parliamentary elections, we also introduced a new edition of TestVot, the only vote advice application available at all parliamentary, presidential and European elections held in Romania since 2008. The online application shows which party or candidate the voter is closest to, while trying to steer people's attention to their programmes and policy issues by opening a debate on substance.

Launched eight days before the elections, the 2016 edition of TestVot was a massive success by Romanian standards of engagement with online political information tools: the online questionnaire was completed no fewer than 25,140 times.

## Parlament Transparent

Throughout the year, we published several articles on Parlament Transparent ('Transparent Parliament'), our parliamentary monitoring website focussed on the Romanian Chamber of Deputies. The articles were related to issues salient on the agenda at time (e.g. hospital acquired infections, public service media) or to electoral events, such as the nomination and participation of MPs in the local elections.

Parlament Transparent automatically tracks the votes and policy specialisation of individual MPs and parties, analyses the MPs' involvement in local interest representation by content-analysing their parliamentary questions and monitors the latest developments in 15 public policy domains. Thus, it was a very useful tool in the months leading up to the aforementioned elections of last year. On that

occasion, we launched several in-depth analyses into the drivers of candidacy and re-selection of MPs participating at the 2016 parliamentary elections, focussing on their record of activity, experience and integrity.

## Less Hate, More Speech – Teens get involved

This project's aim was to prepare teens in ten schools across the country to recognise and react to online and offline hate speech and intolerant discourse with the help of non-formal educational workshops and training, online and offline interactive games and quizzes, and a three-day thematic contest camp.

Given the growing trend of incivility and intolerance online, to which teenagers are exposed every day, our hope for the project was to be able to show kids what to make of expressions of intolerance and hate speech and how to strive to respond to them with less hate: using more speech rather than more aggression and without shying away from social interactions. Developed as a spin-off of our research project, we involved the journalists from Gazeta Sporturilor, who had become familiar with our moderation method and principles during the research projects. In this way, we used the insights gained during months of research to enable kids to deal more effectively with rough situations online and offline.

Seven local workshops were organised in 2016, through which we reached a diverse range of localities: communities with high poverty rates, communities with ethnic minorities or communities from big urban areas. Following the

workshops, local student teams organised twenty mini-events with a total of 500 participants, including students, parents, and members of local communities. In the final month of the project, forty students and ten teachers participated in a thematic contest camp, a very successful and enjoyable event, which facilitated interactions between students from very different backgrounds and enabled cooperation and mutual learning for both students and teachers.

This project was developed in partnership with the EduC Association and it was financed by the SEE grants 2009-2014, through the NGO Fund in Romania, administered by the Civil Society Development Foundation (CSDF) in Romania. The project ran a budget of 78,314.97 EUR.

## Media Resources: Journalists work with NGOs

The project capitalised on the expertise of non-governmental organisations and the impact of journalistic investigations to promote a mutually effective collaboration between journalists and NGOs, based on principles of respect for each other's professional norms and expertise. Thus, the aim was to offer a bigger platform for all this expertise to break through the omniscient choir of 'analysts' that flood the media on a daily basis, expressing views on anything and everything, irrespective of their background or knowledge.

In 2016, we focussed on nurturing the media products. The team of journalists (with both local and national media backgrounds) drafted a series of eight investigations focussing on modern forms of child exploitation, the opinions of experts

working for the children's rights, the situation of children left home alone by parents who went to work in foreign countries, discrimination against the Romanian LGBTQ+ community, children's diet in schools, deforestation, and the safeguarding of the Romanian national heritage.

In total, 47 articles and interviews on the above-mentioned themes were published, for which 11 Romanian NGOs were consulted, several representatives of relevant public authorities and 19 other experts were conferred with for their insights into fields such as education, healthcare, and law. We also organised two roundtables, which brought journalists, students, and NGO representatives together in a shared learning experience, as well as a final workshop, attended by more than 40 people.

By the end of the project, in April 2016, we launched a database containing over 240 NGOs working in domains such as children's rights, young people, migration, human trafficking, public policies, and the media. The database relies on a powerful search engine and allows the NGOs and their experts to edit their data as they see fit. Last, but not least, we edited a guide explaining and promoting the collaboration model between journalists and NGO representatives.

This project, financed by SEE grants 2009-2014, was implemented between March 1st 2015 and April 30th 2016 and ran a budget of 72,157.21 EUR. The project represented a prototype for Romania and was evaluated by the organisation managing the grants (CSDF) as an

innovative project for the Romanian civil society programmes.

### **Less Hate More Speech: An Experimental and Comparative Study**

2016 was the third year in which we implemented the Less Hate, More Speech (LHMS) research project, which aimed to examine 'the role political elites and mass media play, intentionally or unintentionally, in reducing or promoting anti-democratic and intolerant discourse among the citizens' (LHMS blog)

The focus of the year was three-fold: experiments and surveys of public opinion, surveys of elites (legislators and journalists), and online comment related experiments.

'The study of public opinion, through national surveys and online or survey-embedded experiments, showed what inner resources and mechanisms we can mobilize to encourage tolerance, as well as what kind of messages from elites are likely to elicit more tolerant reactions.' (LHMS blog) This information served as an input for further experiments in the comments sections of the news media websites involved in the project.

A research report, several topical research notes, and two academic conference papers were produced during this year, after the data collection in the Romanian citizens' survey ended in April 2016. Members of MRC's research team presented the two papers based on the Romanian survey data in a comparative context at the 2016 conferences of the American Political Science Association

(APSA) and the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR).

The report's aim was to examine how widespread intolerant attitudes towards the Roma minority are in Romania and Norway, what differences there are in terms of determinants and whether there are any society-level mechanisms that inhibit the expression of harmful opinions. The first objective of the report was thus to explore whether there is a pan-cultural framework for understanding intolerant attitudes and relationships between groups, while the second objective was to examine whether there are universal basic principles of respect and civility that can be mobilized to act as safeguards against both active and passive forms of discrimination.

While the working papers pursue the same objectives as the report, they also take into account and emphasize the importance of exploring cultural and societal variations.

The first of them places Romanian attitudes towards refugees from warzones in the Middle East in a comparative context, and then examines the determinants of these attitudes in terms of the personal characteristics that facilitate positive and negative attitudes.

The second paper's findings underlined that, while levels of intolerance towards various vulnerable groups show considerable variation within Romania, the key sources of intolerance are practically the same for all minorities, even though our questionnaire items referred to such diverse ex-

amples as Roma people, ethnic Hungarians, Jews, LGBT people, the poor, and Orthodox priests. As a countervailing force, optimism about economic prospects and higher levels of political knowledge made even people who are negatively predisposed towards minority groups accept equal rights for all groups, whether or not they like them.

We also conducted a series of planned experiments that aimed to assess the influence of narrative frames and message sources on the expression of anti-democratic and intolerant discourse. This was achieved via an online experiment carried out during the campaign for the 2016 parliamentary elections in Romania by including a set of embedded experiments in the Less Hate More Speech national survey, which were both described in a subsequent report.

During this year, we also further developed the design of survey-embedded experiments on rights-denial, attitudes towards refugees and begging, and included them in the 2016 post-electoral survey of the Romanian Election Studies (RES). In addition, we also repeated, sometimes with new variations, several experiments that were originally included in the LHMS national survey.

### **Media system and political elite data**

In respect of our contextual data, in 2016 we continued our efforts to field the European Media Systems Survey (EMSS) and managed to conduct the LHMS survey of national legislators in Romania. In order to be able to reach a satisfactory response rate, the latter required four months of

efforts, which included lobbying individual Members of Parliament, party leaders, and presidential advisors. We closed the survey on the 5th of April, 2016, after obtaining 115 responses, amounting to a response rate of 21.9%.

### **LHMS Media and comment-related activities and outputs in 2016**

As mentioned above, the plan for 2016 was to test several experiments in comments sections to see which commenters responded better to and to test how they would react, with the goal of increasing engagement and diminishing the expressions of online hate speech.

Three such experiments were conducted.

The first was a two-phased 'preview' experiment, which exposed commenters to one or several messages warning them of the moderation and giving them a chance to reconsider what they wrote. This was further developed to include explanatory, post-moderation messages under comments to show why they had been moderated.

The aim was to see whether urging users to stop and think about their comment could reduce incivility. The analyses showed that the overwhelming majority of comments were neither checked nor edited after the users received a warning. Still, upping the share of comments that received a warning pop-up from 50% to 100% (in the second phase) resulted in an increase of the share of comments that were actually checked by the users once again before submission. It also almost doubled the share of edited comments (comments

whose final version was not the same as the initial version).

The second experiment involved a 'small font mask', which meant that words that required moderation - and would normally have been replaced by the asterisk symbol - were shown in a very small font. The aim was to see how users would react if they could, with some effort, read the moderated portions of someone else's comment or if they saw their own post 'twisted' this way.

The third experiment was an 'intervention' experiment, in which moderators and authors of the articles were encouraged to interact with the commenters on specific articles based on a structure agreed beforehand.

The goal was to see whether a more obvious presence of moderators or the authors of the articles in the comment section would change the way in which commenters expressed themselves and interacted. There were three types of interventions: questions to a specific commenter or to the entire comment section; corrections of a commenter; or messages highlighting a valuable contribution from a previous commenter. The analyses done on this experiment have not revealed any evidence of decreased incivility in the comment section following the intervention, suggesting that more sustained, rather than one-time interventions are required, and that such interventions need to occur on more articles and over a longer period of time to make a lasting difference.

Furthermore, as part of an effort to give people interactive comment section tools and study what kind of comments they choose to promote or penalise, comment reaction buttons were introduced on GSP.ro in June 2016. They are: like, respect and flag. On the same day as the buttons, we also introduced an alternative manner of viewing the comment section, ranking the comments by popularity (number of likes and respects combined). To give journalists more tools to promote high quality user-generated content, we introduced comment highlighting on GSP.ro, Tolo.ro and Blogsport.ro in 2016 - a great way to feature good contributions and encourage quality content.

### **Report on the 'big numbers' resulting from the moderation**

Our 'Big Numbers from the Moderation Process' [report](#) presents the main trends and effects of moderation on the four 'Less Hate'-moderated sites (GSP.ro, Tolo.ro, Paginademedia.ro, Blogsport.ro), in terms of easily quantifiable aspects like the number of comments and commenters and traffic. On GSP.ro, where the moderation supervised by the researchers ran for the longest time (14 months, starting in May 2015), the share of moderated comments went down over time, suggesting that comments became less intolerant and uncivil.

### **Report on the collaboration between researchers and journalists**

In 2016, MRC also produced a [report](#) on how the moderation component project came about. This report, entitled 'Engaging with the 'Other': Report on a Collaboration between Journalists

and Researchers,' was presented at the Perugia International Journalism Festival in April 2016. It explains why the parties involved were motivated to partner each other and reflects on how the collaboration worked. While the journalists were interested in cutting back on the incivility and intolerance in the comment section and finding ways to reach and interact with their audience, the researchers were looking to study in what circumstances and through what methods this could be achieved. The report draws lessons relevant for other outlets that might wish to engage in comment moderation or other researchers and journalists that might wish to engage in projects together.

### **Report on editorial policies on user-generated content at 69 sports and news outlets in five countries**

In October 2016, we published a [report](#), entitled 'Managing the Comment Section: Terms, Conditions and Procedures. Romania in a Comparative Perspective,' which addresses trends in editorial policies and comment moderation on 69 websites from five countries (France, Hungary, the United Kingdom, Romania and the United States of America). The report shows that the majority of websites with user-generated content terms and conditions prohibit discourse that incites to hatred or discrimination (85%) and vulgar language or images (79%). The rules of Romanian websites tend to be somewhat briefer and focussed on problems like spam, trolling or vulgarity than issues like discrimination or personal attacks. The second section of the report addresses the content and thinking process behind the community rules

developed for the 'Less Hate' partner websites.

### **Survey of readers and commenters on GSP.ro and Tolo.ro**

To learn more about the audience's and commenters' perceptions of moderation, as well as expectations in terms of journalistic content and engagement, in November-December 2016, we surveyed readers and commenters on the core moderated websites, GSP.ro and Tolo.ro. We had an 11% response rate for GSP.ro and 20% for Tolo.ro: we heard from 510 GSP.ro and 1,134 Tolo.ro reader-commenters. 66% of GSP and 77% of Tolo.ro commenters agreed that the number of aggressive or intolerant comments had reduced as a result of the moderation. Large majorities of the commenters appreciated that authors or moderators highlight the best comments. They were also supportive of the active participation of journalists in the comment section.

# EVENTS

The work that the Median Research Centre has been doing since its set up in 2003 has been focussed on reaching the wider public by making the wealth of knowledge in the social sciences available in an accessible manner, and applying it to real life situations. This was also true for the events we organised over the past year, which focussed on a range of topics and aimed at different target groups, including young people whom we tried to engage by taking notice of and reacting to topics or situations related to democratic values.

Out of the 13 events organised by MRC, three were aimed at bringing together journalists (from both local and national media) and people working in NGOs, whose expertise and voice rarely shine through the omniscient 'analysts' occupying print, online or TV media. Both sides had the opportunity to share knowledge and experience in two round tables and one final workshop. This interaction fed into 47 features, investigations and interviews written up by the journalists in the project, in which 11 NGOs shared their knowledge through the voice of 13 experts.

Eight other workshops and a camp were dedicated to middle school and high school students, where with the help of interactive games and young journalists they were able to learn more about hate speech online and offline and understand how to react to it. The workshops organised, with our partner EduC Association, were held both in big cities across the country, and in smaller and less privileged communities, with an average of 20 students taking part in each workshop. In April, all the students and their teachers participated in a three-day camp at which a competition on iden-



Media Resources Workshops



Less Hate More Speech – Teens get involved! Camp

tifying hate speech was held. In total, over 60 participants supported and cheered on the ten teams involved and all the children received presents and diplomas at the end.

Also in April 2016, together with the European Commission Representation in Romania, we co-hosted the launch of the Media Pluralism Monitor, for which

MRC had done the research work related to our country in the previous year. More than 30 people attended (journalists, media people and experts from several embassies) and debated the risk factors discovered by our research and the context in which they appeared.

One other event was held in September, the final

workshop in the 'Rethinking individual representation' project. Two of the most senior MRC researchers presented and discussed their research findings with 15 academics affiliated with universities and research institutes in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Italy, Croatia and Romania. Staff from the European Commission Representation in Romania and from several embassies also attended the event.



Media Pluralism Monitor  
Launch Event



Rethinking Representation Event

# MEDIAN RESEARCH CENTRE IN MEDIA

In spite of a small advertising and promotional budget we managed to raise MRC's presence in the news and increase brand awareness by participating in more events, securing fruitful media partnerships, offering our expertise and promoting our research through accessible tools, insightful and clear reports.

The main strategy laid out by the Executive Director, who also acts as the main communication person given her extensive background in marketing and media, was closely connected to topics high on the public agenda on which MRC should build and profit from in order to bring forward its relevant research work to the general public.

Two main opportunities therefore provided the most visibility for the organisation in 2016.

The first was related to the November Parliamentary Elections, for which MRC prepared several tools and analyses as was the case in 2012 and 2008. In addition to a complete revamping of the OpenPolitics.ro website, MRC's main platform, we published several analyses on important topics in the elections, along with the main parties' positions on those topics. We also set up TestVot, an easy to use voting advice application, and updated Parlament Transparent, MRC's platform that tracks MPs activities in the Lower House, with several new articles.

These efforts translated into 14 mentions of information retrieved from Parlament Transparent in national and local news outlets. The articles focussed on the activity of former deputies who sought re-election, while an ample interview with one of the biggest Italian news agency, askanews, with the President of the organisation focussed on the meaning of these elections and the predictions made by opinion polls.

Moreover, TestVot enjoyed one of its most successful editions since its launch in 2008, with over 25,000 completed forms in a little over a week, due to it being shared by several media outlets and journalists. We were also contacted by Paginademedia.ro, a niche website dedicated to the media and advertising community, to provide an analysis of the public speeches made by politicians during the campaign.

The second opportunity was connected to the communication and promotion efforts in the Less Hate, More Speech project, which unfolded throughout the year. Highlights were prompted by the release of research results in the project and our presence at the International Journalism Festival in April 2016, one of the biggest media events in Europe, as well as by our participation in a very popular event in Romania, the Power of Storytelling Conference, that was positively reviewed in multiple articles in October.

Power of Storytelling Conference



# PUBLICATIONS

Median Research Centre is committed to pursuing systematic studies into pressing issues for society by using state-of-the-art research theories and methods to make the knowledge it amasses readily available to the general public.

To this end, in 2016 the organisation published six reports dealing with different issues related to media and public opinion.

The first, published in March of 2016, was a thorough analysis of the dire straits the Public Service Broadcaster in Romania found itself in, a full exploration of the causes and determining factors that rendered the PSB broke and obsolete. It was released at a time when the subject was high on the public agenda and it sheds light on the legislative, management and political independence-related problems at the root of the TVR's growing financial debt, low viewership rates and low-quality programming.

Another report published in April, commissioned by the European University Institute and the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom and co-financed by the European Commission, scanned the entire Romanian media system in order to identify threats to pluralism: an assessment of 200 indicators including basic protection, market plurality, political independence and social inclusiveness.

Following an examination of the editorial policies on comments on 69 websites in several countries, we published a report detailing trends in how news and sports publications handle comments and the way in which we developed the commenting rules for the four 'Less Hate' partner websites (GSP.ro, Tolo.ro, Blogsport.ro and Paginademedia.ro). The report also proposed a set of rules that any online community could take and use on their own websites.

Finally, MRC members published, using data from the 'Rethinking Individual Representation' project, an academic article in the journal *Problems of Post-communism*, while three other articles were accepted for publication in *Social Science Quarterly*, *Government and Opposition* and *Ask: Research and Methods*.



**Public Service Broadcaster**

# FINANCIAL RESULTS

This section details significant resolutions adopted or endorsed by the management team during 2016. Budgets are prepared, reviewed and approved annually. During the year, progress is monitored on a monthly basis and adjustments made to reflect reality with prior approval. Each project developed by MRC has a project manager who is also responsible for monitoring the expenditure for each activity against the approved budget with the help of the financial and accounting department. MRC has a set of internal policies regarding authorisation of expenditure, payments and acquisitions.

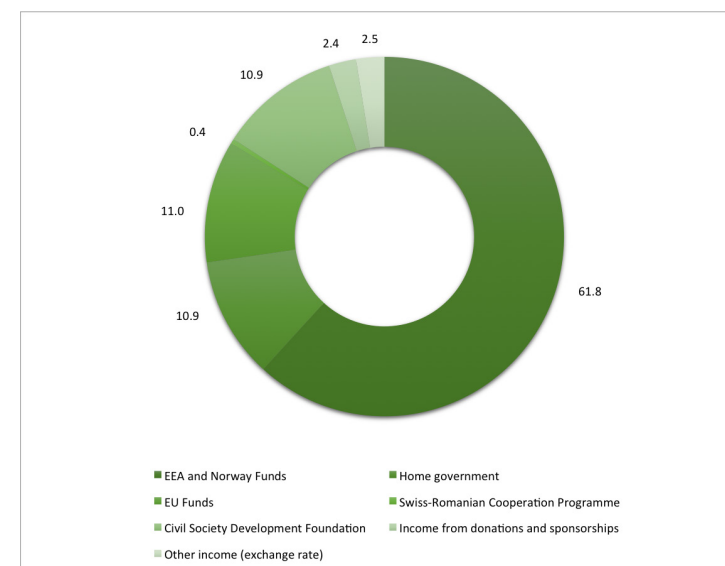
In 2016 the biggest revenue source were the EEA and Norway funds, followed by EU funds, as well as funds coming from the Civil Society Development Foundation

Revenue by source	LEI	EURO	%
EEA and Norway Funds	1,200,956	264,464	61.8
Home government	211,934	46,670	10.9
EU Funds	213,705	47,060	11.0
Swiss-Romanian Cooperation Programme	8,296	1,827	0.4
Civil Society Development Foundation	211,684	46,615	10.9
Income from donations and sponsorships	47,615	10,485	2.4
Other income (exchange rate)	49,388	10,876	2.5
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>1,943,578</b>	<b>427,997</b>	<b>100</b>

Expenses	LEI	EURO	%
Personnel costs	1,208,888	266,210	63
Subcontracting	503,769	110,935	26
Marketing	10,684	2,353	1
Travel	116,377	25,627	6
Overhead	74,855	16,484	4
<b>Total expenses</b>	<b>1,914,573</b>	<b>421,610</b>	<b>100</b>

(which supported two of our projects) and the Romanian government (as part of its agreement with the Donor States in the Financial Mechanism 2009-2014 to provide 20% of winning research projects' eligible budgets).



Income and expenditure	LEI	EURO
Total income	1,943,578	427,997
Total expenditure	1,914,573	421,610
<b>Excess</b>	<b>29,005</b>	<b>6,387</b>

Balance Sheet	LEI	EURO
Total assets	934,873	205,869
Total liabilities	893,974	196,863
<b>Net assets</b>	<b>40,899</b>	<b>9,006</b>

# MANAGEMENT

## CORE TEAM

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

President and Founder: **Marina Popescu**

Executive Director: **Roxana Bodea**

Financial Manager: **Mihai Grigore**

Research Director: **Mihail Chiru**

Accountant: **Elena Buzatu**

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

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

Project Managers: **Sorina Slusarec**, **Diana Trifu**

Designer: **Nicole Nasta**

## COLLABORATORS

**Dragoș Adăscăliței** ♦ **Adina Cristea** ♦ **Cristian Dima**  
**Banică** ♦ **Octavia Borș** ♦ **Mitică Docan** ♦ **Justin Gafiuc** ♦  
**Marius Ghincea** ♦ **Felipe Gonzales Santos** ♦ **Ion Aurelian**  
**Gheorghiiță** ♦ **Andrija Henjak** ♦ **Ionuț Iordache** ♦ **Theodor**  
**Jumătate** ♦ **Samuel Koebrich** ♦ **Raluca Lazăroi** ♦ **Marius**  
**Margărit** ♦ **Adriana Mihai** ♦ **Ioana Mihalcea** ♦ **Diana**  
**Mitrache** ♦ **Alexandru Moise** ♦ **Alexandru Morega** ♦  
**Mirela Neag** ♦ **Oana Olariu** ♦ **Cătălin Țepelin** ♦ **Iulian**  
**Pavel** ♦ **Alexandru Răducanu** ♦ **Andreea Sevic** ♦ **Istvan**  
**Szekely** ♦ **Silviana Tarlea** ♦ **Ana Maria Suci** ♦ **Ioan**  
**Tănase** ♦ **Cătălin Tolontan** ♦ **Bianca Tudor**



**Marina Popescu**  
President & Founder



**Gabor Tóka**  
Board Member



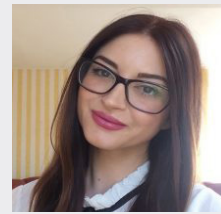
**Borbála Kovács**  
Board Member



**Roxana Bodea**  
Executive Director



**Elena Buzatu**  
Accountant



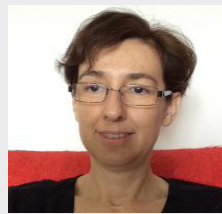
**Tania Chilin**  
Senior Researcher



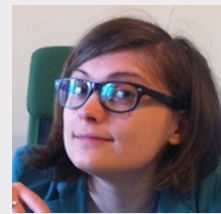
**Mihai Chiru**  
Research Director



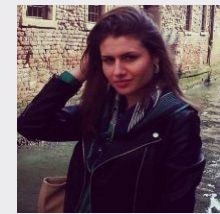
**Mihai Grigore**  
Financial Manager



**Oana Lup**  
Senior Researcher



**Adina Marincea**  
Senior Researcher



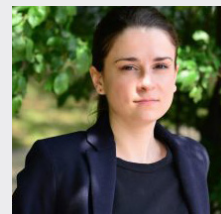
**Cristina Mihalachi**  
Junior Researcher



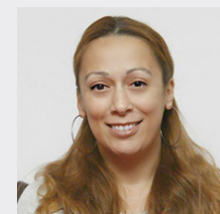
**Sorina Slusarec**  
Project Manager



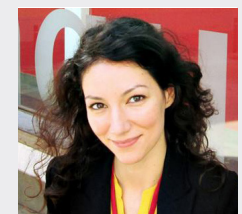
**Nicole Nasta**  
Designer



**Raluca Toma**  
Senior Researcher



**Laura Trandafir**  
Junior Researcher



**Diana Trifu**  
Project Manager

## MANAGEMENT OVERVIEW

In 2016, the management team focussed on monitoring the daily operations of the organisation, tracking the budget implementation of the five on-going projects and adjusting the framework and procedures for an optimal workflow, minimising overlaps and securing personnel for new supporting positions.

Management also lead efforts relating to the finishing up of two of our projects 'Less Hate, More Speech - Teens get involved!' and 'Media Resources: Journalists work with NGO experts!' This also meant providing support throughout the external audit of the two projects.

## HUMAN CAPITAL

Median Research Centre is committed to attracting a diverse workforce, as well as ensuring equality and inclusiveness. We set out to create an international working environment where different cultures can interact and be part of international projects that open up possibilities for the organisation and its members in order to remain flexible, active and connected, not just to lo-

cal issues, but to European and international issues too.

Given this, in 2016 we added 11 new members to our team who were in charge of either research activities (73%) or in administrative and support roles (27%) in order to strengthen our core team, aside from inherent staff fluctuations on different

projects. The increase was offset by 12 other people whose contracts expired in 2016, chiefly due to the closing of two of our projects in April; most of them remain part of our collaborators' network. Most of our staff resided in Romania, but during this year we also had people living in Hungary as well as people of Spanish, American and Moldavian nationalities join our team.

# PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ensuring our team develops professionally in their respective field is essential to our values at the Median Research Centre. We support curiosity and knowledge and are committed to offer our staff the chance to progress, pick up new skills and stay connected to the most recent developments in their field of interest.

With this in mind, starting in 2014, we designed and implemented the Continuous

Professional Development Program (CPDP). This is an initiative meant to give access to training and development to all our team, through attending classes, seminars or workshops held either by external vetted organisations or by our own most senior researchers.

Thus, in 2016, seven of our team members attended such classes, both in Romania and internationally. The subjects covered

in these programs ranged from theoretical models, text analysis tools, designing and conducting field research to trainings in quantitative methods and communication methods for science work in politicised environments and the latest developments in human resources' legislation and tools.