THE ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF POLITICAL MENTALITY AND POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR DURING ELECTIONS

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Mass media has become a key social institution, demonstrating its importance and influence in the political processes in the Republic of Moldova. The development and implementation of new information technologies have contributed to emphasizing the importance of the functions performed by the media in the political system, respectively to increasing the influence and the role of mass media in political processes.

Having an essential contribution to the formation of public opinion, political choices, critical or positive attitudes towards political actors, the formation of political culture, the media have become the levers of power to promote ideas, positions, attitudes or political visions. Moreover, the trust that the population has in the media, the 2nd place after the church according to the Public Opinion Barometer of June 2020, further emphasizes the role of the media in shaping the mentality and political behavior of the population [1]. Thus, the interaction between the media and politics is permanent, and information is perceived as a tool of influence and manipulation, becoming the main source of communication between politicians and the electorate.

The power of the media in a democratic society has been analyzed by several researchers, so two approaches have emerged regarding the influence of the media on voter mentality and behavior:

• According to the conclusions of the representatives of the first approach (P. Lazarsfeld, J. Clapper), the information transmitted to voters through information sources only reinforces existing preferences and orientations, which were formed by the long-term influence of other factors (income, social status, profession) [2, p. 167].

• The concept of Walter Lippman who highlighted in his work “Public Opinion” the role of active actor of the press within the political

system and in the formation of the political sympathies of the citizens. Within this current, the connection between the information disseminated by the press and the social importance of these issues for the audience was discussed [2, p. 167].

Both approaches are based on observations of the electoral process and the conclusions are in line with reality, but with the changing nature of election campaigns and increased media involvement, the effects of media influence in a short time, such as the election campaign, have begun to be studied more intensively compared to the influence of the media in long-term media campaigns. Even in a short period of time, mass media have a great capacity for penetration and persuasion, for shaping perceptions of things and for influencing public opinion and behavior [3, p. 86]. This is possible also due to the unstable character of the masses in terms of attachment to certain visions, ideas and beliefs, a fact also mentioned by Gustave Le Bon in his works.

Mass media in the Republic of Moldova hardly give up their paternalistic habits in relation to the state, trying to combine two antithetical aspects in their daily and perspective activity – that of editorial independence and that of economic-financial autonomy. Consequently, in the local information-communication sector there are uncertainties and wanderings of positions, the media institutions migrating from one extreme to another [4, p. 62].

The limited possibilities for obtaining financial independence, on the one hand, and the influence that the media can exert in shaping the mentality and political behavior of the electorate, on the other hand, determine that most media sources are strongly associated with the major political forces, and the concentration of property diminishes the media pluralism. According to the opinion of J.-M. Cotteret, in order to come to power today, you need to know how to attract to your side the media. The author considers that power is based on an elective legitimacy, firstly, and on a media legitimacy, secondly [3, p. 90].

Two factors determine the intensity and tone of the election campaign in the media: the penetration rate of information sources and the rate of influence of public opinion. The most affected by the manipulation phenomenon are the televised political debates and the

TV news journals, according to 56% and 53% of the respondents, respectively. Likewise, the online environment (Internet – 34%, social networking sites – 28%, blogs – 22%) registers important shares regarding the perception of false information on socio-political issues [5]. Thus, television is the main target when it comes to achieving a major impact that the media has on the creation of public opinion, increasing the level of credibility of political actors among the population and shaping the political mentality and behavior.

Although mass media have no commanding power, like state institutions, the impact on society is overwhelming: they inform, develop civic spirit, create currents of opinion, launch models and propel personalities [6, p. 10-11]. The media play a key role in the elections, being one of the main external factors that determine transformations in the variable nature of the political mentality and, respectively, of the political behavior of the electorate. Due to the lack of economic and financial independence and the acquisition of editorial dependence, the media in the Republic of Moldova are controlled by various political groups, and their editorial policy is subordinated to narrow political interests. Although there is a strong interest in supporting independent media institutions international grant programs, the organizational and diversification capacity of funds by independent media is very weak. In addition, the share of information propelled into the media and information space by independent media is not comparable to the national coverage capacity of politically controlled media institutions.

Electoral campaigns are characterized by a diverse amalgam of manipulation methods and techniques, which are aimed at influencing and shaping the mentality and political behavior of the electorate, especially the unprepared, uninformed voter with an unformed political perception. In this sense, media education must be a strategic pillar for media organizations and international partners, so that any attempt to influence the political mentality is stopped by a critical attitude towards the media product. In the same vein, it is important to raise awareness of the issue of political manipulation, propaganda and misinformation among the population of the Republic of Moldova, but also among the authorities responsible for developing and implementing public policies in this area.

Counteracting and preventing actions to influence political mentality and behavior through manipulative techniques and methods must be done by strengthening regulatory institutions, ensuring their independence and autonomy. It is also important to define more clearly and strengthen the levers for the application of sanctions to combat propaganda and misinformation. The implementation of these recommendations could contribute to the effective regulation of the media, reduce the level of propaganda and manipulation, but also to an increased capacity of the population to adopt a reluctant attitude towards attempts to influence the political mentality and model political behavior.

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