

Whom and how does the REM monitor? Analysis of the methodology of media monitoring in the 2022 elections.

On January 20th, 2022, the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media published the “Methodology for monitoring the election media campaign”, on the basis of which it will observe the upcoming April elections in the media. The methodology emerged as one of the measures agreed upon in the inter-party dialogue on electoral conditions, although it is actually a precondition for the REM to implement its legal role, i.e. to monitor the behaviour of the media during the campaign and report to the public. As the only institution with such authority, the REM has the task of creating an environment in which election participants have the opportunity to present themselves to citizens equally, and citizens the opportunity to exercise their right to be timely, truthfully, fully and objectively informed.

During the election cycles between 2014 and 2020, the REM did not perform its role. During the 2016 parliamentary elections, the REM did not publish the results of media monitoring, and during the 2017 presidential elections, it did not conduct oversight. During the 2020 parliamentary elections, as a result of the first inter-party dialogue on electoral conditions conducted months before the official start of the campaign, the REM began again to act in accordance with its role. Nevertheless, the REM’s activity during these elections proved to be a formality, as the methodology used to monitor the media was not clearly presented to the public, while the results of the monitoring [cast doubt on its credibility and objectivity](#).

Our analysis of the new methodology according to which the REM will conduct oversight of the presidential and early parliamentary elections in 2022, which are scheduled for April 3rd, shows that it contains serious shortcomings and ambiguities. By additional analysis of the first results obtained by the REM on the basis of this methodology, we concluded that consequently their completeness and accuracy may be called into question.

In other words, the inadequacy of the methodology according to which the REM plans to monitor the media during the 2022 elections is reflected in the following key shortcomings:

- lack of clear criteria according to which media and programme content for monitoring are selected;
- narrow interpretation of media representation of political actors, which does not cover all its important aspects;
- preventing the accurate and consistent detection of the tonality in which the actors are represented.

Following is an elaboration on each of the observed shortcomings.

1. Unclear criteria for selection of media that are subject to monitoring

In the methodology published by the REM on the same day as the first media oversight report¹, on January 20th, 2022, it is stated that *“The REM Programme Monitoring and Analysis Service will monitor the election media campaign of those media service providers (MSP) that will be monitored pursuant to the decision made by the REM’s Council”*. Nevertheless, the public was not provided with information about the criteria on which the REM Council bases this decision. Based on the data from the first media oversight report, the question of selectivity can be raised, since it is not clear according to which criteria two cable channels (N1 and Nova S) are included, but not other cable channels focusing on news content (Euronews, Insider TV Channel, TV Tanjug, Kurir TV, Vesti...).

2. Insufficiently clear and accurate definition of the sample of shows that enter the measurement

According to the data of the first MSP oversight report, it is not completely clear by which criteria the sample of shows that fall under the monitoring of the REM is defined. The report states that *“the subject of monitoring is not the entire programme of the observed MSP, but the programme contents in which political subjects most often appear, the most watched shows that are broadcast in prime time, including morning programmes, central news programmes and programme contents that were broadcast from 20:00 to 24:00”*.

Nonetheless, as in the case of the selection of the media that are subject to monitoring, in this case, too, the impression is that the sample was chosen arbitrarily. It is unclear why some shows did not enter the sample while others did. For example, why on B92 television, apart from *News* (“Vesti”) and *Four o’clock news* (“Vesti u 16”), the shows *Looking back* (“Osvrt”) and *Focus* “Fokus”, were not monitored, although by their format they belong to the news programme in which political actors feature almost every day. It remains unclear why the shows *What on Earth Are You Doing* (“Šta radite bre”) and *Eye* (“Oko”), were not monitored even though they were included in the RTS news programme by the public service Radio Television of Serbia (RTS), and are a part of the signed Agreement on Improving the Conditions for Holding Elections².

3. Inconsistent comparative analysis

The analysis of the published REM methodology as well as the first oversight report show that the forthcoming reports will not take into account the criteria of media coverage (national, regional, cable coverage), nor the content they broadcast most often. This points to a

¹ The first REM report, entitled “Political Pluralism - Media Service Providers Oversight Report”, refers to the period from January 1st to January 15th, 2022: <https://link.crtars/33>

² <https://link.crtars/34>

methodological inconsistency in comparing data from media with national coverage with those with regional or cable coverage, despite the difference in audience size, which is many times greater on televisions with national coverage.³

Moreover, the report does not take into account the total time each media outlet devoted to political actors. Instead of taking the same segment of time for all monitored media, which would make the comparison possible and justified, with its methodology, the REM opted for a different choice of programmes during 24 hours on each of the selected media outlets. With this choice of different shows on different media, the presentation of data in the total time of each individual medium is not the same for everyone. For some media, that time is longer due to a larger number or longer duration of shows, and for some it is shorter. For example, the total time on TV B92, where only two shows were observed, is many times shorter than the total time on Pink TV or RTS 1.

4. Neglecting the role of “object” in media content

It remains unclear whether the REM methodology takes into account both roles that one actor in media content can play: the role of the subject (when a political actor speaks in the first person, directly in the programme), and the role of the object (when another interlocutor, a guest or a news presenter talks about a political actor). The analysis of the data of the first REM report gives the impression that the REM does not make a clear distinction between the role of the subject and the object, or at least does not do so in a transparent way, which significantly reduces the representation of political actors who did not have the opportunity to speak in the first person and directly address the audience. This kind of measurement gave a distorted picture of the media representation of political actors and parties. At the same time, omitting the monitoring of political actors in the role of “object” affects the provision of an objective analysis of the overall tone of the representation of actors (whether they are presented positively, neutrally or negatively). Since the tonality attributed to a political actor in the role of the subject is predominantly neutral, because the political actor speaks in the first person, the importance of the tonality in which the political actor is represented in the role of “objects” is what most reflects the media’s attitude towards political actors. It has a significant role in shaping the attitudes of voters about different political parties and their representatives.

5. The notion of election campaign participants has not been precisely defined

The notion of participants is confronted with several insufficiently clear and accurate definitions, which consequently leaves room for inconsistent and biased allocation of time to individual political actors and parties.

The first of the ambiguities refers to the definition of analysts, i.e. the definition of individuals who fall in the category of analysts. If analysts are members of certain parties, are their appearances recorded as belonging to a political party or an analyst as an individual? Is the

³ According to the latest available data from November 2021, the source of which is the Nielsen agency, MPS in the REM sample had the following share in the viewership: RTS 1 - 15.79% share, TV Pink - 18.47% share, TV Prva - 11.42% share, TV Happy - 6.90% share, TV B92 - 2.20% share, N1 - 1.04% share, 1.64% share.

time given to analysts recorded for analysts regardless of the topic they are talking about, i.e. is their time in the media recorded regardless of the topic of their presentation or not? For example, is the time allotted to an MP and a member of the Serbian Progressive Party, Predrag Rajić, who is a frequent guest on the PMS programmes as a political analyst, allocated to Predrag Rajić as a political analyst or as an MP and member of the Serbian Progressive Party?

Furthermore, it is not clear which experts are considered analysts in this regard. For example, we know that doctors are also classified in this category since doctor Branimir Nestorović was given time as an analyst in the *Amidži show*, which was broadcast on January 4th, starting at 10 p.m. This classification brings us back to the vaguely defined determinant of who is attributed the time if a doctor is also a member of a particular political party.

An additional ambiguity arising from the insufficiently clear definition of election campaign participants is the time that the REM noted and determined for the category of non-parliamentary parties, which refers to groups of citizens who are not participants in the election process such as *Kreni promeni*, *Novi optimizam*, *Skupština slobodne Srbije*. Furthermore, the time of the Serbian List from Kosovo is included in the category of non-parliamentary parties, as well as the party that is not registered in the register of political parties kept by the Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-Government⁴, Serbian Democratic Party – Serbia.

6. The way data is presented is unclear and leads to biased conclusions

The data in the first REM report is not clearly presented. It is difficult to conclude from the data what is the total representation and tonality of individual political parties.

First, the total representation is divided according to the method of classification (for example, the President of the Republic, the Government, the Parliamentary Majority, the Assembly, the Mayor, the Provincial Government of Vojvodina, the Provincial Assembly), and then the tonality, while data on the total representation of individual parties are missing. The same principle was applied to the classification by representation of political parties on the basis of topics and tonalities.

The only data that are summarised are the tonality and representation of topics for each individual medium. However, without data on how the tonality and topics are distributed by each individual party, these data are of secondary importance.

Conclusion

These ambiguities significantly affect the results and interpretation of the obtained results of media monitoring. The methodology proposed by the REM is not transparent enough in defining the sample, the subject of measurement, the role of political actors and the notion of election

⁴ <https://link.crt.rs/35>



campaign participants. This opens up space for manipulation at all levels – from measurement and analysis, to data interpretation.

With this approach, the REM once again betokens its intention to avoid showing a clear and true picture of the work of the media, and the way in which political actors are represented and shown in media programmes. By not reporting credibly and accurately on the work of the media, the REM misleads the electorate.

The REM neglected to repair the key shortcomings pointed out by the CRTA during the 2020 elections, which relate to the selective choice of media and shows, and the lack of measurement of political actors in the role of subject and object, in the existing methodology. What emanates from the selective choice of media and television shows is the wrong comparative approach which involves comparing media with different degrees of coverage, i.e. media that due to their coverage have different audience reach, and thus different impact on the audience.

An analysis of the REM methodology leads to the conclusion that there are several factors that artificially reduce the representation of the ruling party and increase the representation of opposition parties. The analysis has shown that there are two main factors that are being manipulated: the lack of measurement of political actors in the role of objects and the insufficiently clearly defined notion of participants in the campaign.

All this leads to the conclusion that the REM did not put itself in the service of public interest and the function assigned to it, and that it did not improve its methodology in the direction of objective and impartial measurement that will enable equal representation of all political actors in the election campaign.