

Handbook on Election Reporting in Montenegro

Tips and Resources

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1 Introduction

1.1 Why this Handbook?

In democratic societies, free and responsible media are a cornerstone of public information, serving as an essential mechanism for holding power to account. Their role becomes especially prominent during election periods, when citizens, political parties, and institutions engage in intensified communication, form opinions, and make decisions that shape the country's future. From the moment elections are announced until election day (the so-called "festival of democracy," as local politicians like to call it), and ultimately until the official declaration of results and formation of government, journalists are expected to be more than mere transmitters of party statements, press releases, and soundbites from campaign events. They must monitor processes, analyze developments, interpret the law (or lack thereof), and ensure fair play.

Why were early elections called? Have all legal preconditions for holding them been met? Who are the candidates on the electoral lists? How are their campaigns financed? Are there any reported abuses, and how are the relevant institutions responding to them? Are the key topics of the campaign aligned with the issues that citizens identify as most important, or are parties and candidates relying on familiar identity-based narratives (homeland-faith-nation), hoping that they'll deliver the most votes with the fewest measurable obligations? Are we seeing misuse of public office through so-called "incumbent campaigning"? Do all candidates receive equal treatment from institutions, including the public broadcaster? Are their promises realistic and based on factual evidence? How has Election Day unfolded? Could the recorded irregularities significantly impact the results? After the vote count and seat distribution, what guides political actors in coalition negotiations - programmatic compatibility or post-election arithmetic? And has the newly formed government fulfilled its pre-election promises?

These are just some of the questions that the public expects credible answers to - from journalists with integrity in trustworthy media. It is our responsibility to make that possible, in accordance with professional standards and applicable regulations.

This handbook is intended for newsrooms, journalists, and editors who report – or will report - on electoral processes, starting from the official announcement of elections, whether regular or early (the classic who, what, where, when, why – the "5Ws"). We hope the handbook will also be useful for journalism students, as well as for analysts who are not media experts but are trying to navigate the very complex field and its ethics.

The goal of the handbook is to serve as a practical guide for professional, ethical, and effective reporting on all phases of the election process: from the moment elections are called, through the campaign and Election Day itself, to the announcement of results and the formation of the government. Additionally, this handbook aims to encourage journalists to reflect critically on their role and responsibility to the public, particularly in a polarized societal environment under pressure from various quarters.

The media are not mere observers in the electoral process – they are active participants who shape the tone and quality of public debate. Their reporting directly influences voter awareness, the campaign atmosphere, and citizens' trust in the process itself. That is why election coverage must be thoughtful, balanced, and grounded in facts, without sensationalism, bias, or prejudice.

What makes election reporting unique, not only in Montenegro, is that it is one of the rare areas of media activity that, in addition to general legal and ethical norms, is also governed by specific rules of conduct. These rules should not be viewed as restrictions imposed on freedom of expression, but

rather as tools that help ensure a balanced representation of political actors, the transparency of the process, and protection of the public interest. This reaffirms the media's vital role as a corrective force in a democracy.

In the Montenegrin context, election reporting carries additional challenges that make it especially complex compared to other societies. First and foremost, the media landscape is deeply fragmented and polarized – both editorially and in terms of ownership. Some media outlets, rather than contributing to clarity on political and societal dilemmas, often actively participate in creating and deepening them. For journalists, this adds another layer of professional difficulty in an environment where the lines between journalism, propaganda, and political activism are increasingly blurred.

One particular "phenomenon" that further complicates the work of journalists during elections is the strong influence of foreign media – from the region and beyond – whose owners, political sponsors, or centers of power seek to shape Montenegrin public opinion directly. These outlets often succeed in shaping the campaign narrative without regard for the interests, needs, or views of local citizens and voters. Despite their reach and influence, they are not bound by Montenegrin laws, regulatory frameworks, or ethical standards. In fact, experience shows that they often have little regard even for universal journalistic principles, further burdening the work of domestic professionals.

For committed journalists, this reality can be both an opportunity and a burden. On the one hand, it creates space to promote credible, responsible journalism that earns public trust. On the other hand, it means contending with rampant disinformation, political pressures, unfair competition, and strategically crafted narratives. That is why this handbook aims to offer not only technical and professional guidelines, but also a contextual framework to help journalists better understand the broader environment in which they operate.

In an era of rapid media transformation, declining institutional trust, and increasing difficulty for audiences to distinguish reliable sources from manipulative ones, the mission of responsible journalism is becoming more complex, and more important. This publication seeks to support that mission, not as a collection of rigid instructions, but as a set of signposts for professional and ethical reporting in the service of citizens and democracy.

The handbook is methodologically and substantively based on the publication "Handbook for Election Reporting", published in 2024 by Mediacentar Sarajevo, the result of years of research and numerous consultations with media professionals in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Taking into account the specificities of the Montenegrin media and political context, this publication adapts and expands the aforementioned model to address local challenges, while reaffirming shared regional standards of journalism in the public interest. By aligning local realities with regional standards, the handbook contributes to preserving media integrity and strengthening public trust during elections.

1.2 A Brief Overview of Elections in Montenegro

Montenegro follows a proportional electoral system, meaning that mandates are allocated in proportion to the number of votes each electoral list receives. The Parliament has 81 seats. Parliamentary elections are held every four years, while presidential elections take place every five years. Local elections are conducted using the same proportional system, but they are not held on the same day in all municipalities. Citizens vote for electoral lists, not for individual candidates. A list must receive at least 3% of the vote at the national level to qualify for the allocation of seats.

For ethnic minorities that make up less than 15% of the population, special rules apply that allow for representation even when their list fails to attain 3% of the vote (under certain conditions). By law, at least 30% of the candidates on each list must be women.

In Montenegro, regular national and local elections are held every four years, while presidential elections are held every five years. Local elections are conducted depending on the municipality, and although there have been proposals to consolidate them into a single election day, there are currently no indications that the law will be amended in that direction.

The right to vote in parliamentary and local elections belongs to adult citizens with Montenegrin citizenship, local residence, and registration in the electoral roll. Elections are typically held on Sundays, except in cases of repeat voting at specific polling stations, which may occur on weekdays.

A voter who is unable to vote at the polling station where they are registered, due to age, disability, hospital or home treatment, may vote by mail instead. The request must be submitted to the polling board at the polling station no later than 13:00 on Election Day. Montenegrin legislation doesn't provide the possibility of voting from abroad.

2 General Professional Standards for Election Reporting

Professional standards in journalism form the foundation of responsible and ethical public information. In Montenegro, as elsewhere in the world, these standards include accuracy, source protection, and the avoidance of hate speech.

The standards are defined by media laws, journalistic codes of ethics, and the practice of self-regulatory bodies. The Code of Journalists of Montenegro outlines core journalistic principles. While the code may be outdated in certain areas and does not address all modern challenges, its basic principles are clearly applicable to election reporting.

1. Accuracy and Verification of Information

All information must be verified from multiple sources before publication. A common issue in Montenegrin campaigns is the use of historical or traditional narratives that may not align with factual history but are embedded in political and social identity. When reporting on statements that include false historical narratives, journalists should avoid merely repeating such claims without context. Instead, they are encouraged to critically assess and deconstruct misleading or inaccurate historical references and to provide audiences with accurate information grounded in verified historical facts.

2. Informed Decision-making

Citizens can only evaluate candidate programs, views, and biographies properly if they have access to accurate and comprehensive information. Misleading or half-truths may lead to choices that do not reflect voters' true interests. Campaigns frequently employ propaganda tactics and disinformation. Journalists must uncover falsehoods, fact-check political claims, and prevent the spread of fake news that could influence the electoral outcome.

3. Consequences of Inaccurate Information

Fake news about election fraud, candidate withdrawals, or alleged scandals can cause confusion and distrust.

4. Discrediting Candidates and Parties

The use of false claims can unjustly damage the reputation of individuals or political entities.

5. Undermining Media Integrity

If media outlets fail to verify facts, they risk losing public trust and becoming tools of manipulation. The Code of Journalists prescribes that, before publishing a report, journalists must ensure that all necessary steps have been taken to verify its accuracy. This means striving for comprehensive reporting and avoiding the omission or suppression of essential information.

It also states that the public's right to know does not justify sensationalist reporting. Journalists must not distort facts through exaggeration, selective emphasis, or biased storytelling. Misleading headlines or slogans that misrepresent the essence of an event or issue should be avoided. The context must always be preserved to prevent misinterpretation.

6. Impartiality and Balance

One of the key principles of professional and lawful media reporting during elections is the duty to provide fair and equal representation to all participants in the electoral process. Media must report impartially, in a balanced manner, and in the public interest – not in the interest of any political option.

No candidate, party, or electoral list should be favored or discriminated against in terms of media exposure, tone of coverage, or selective reporting of statements or events. Equal representation requires careful planning and allocation of media space and airtime for political content, ensuring that all relevant sides have an opportunity to present their views. In the case of broadcast media, this includes balanced participation in news programs, debates, interviews, and other formats.

7. Editorial Comment

It is a common practice for the media to "take a side" during elections. In good practice, this is typically done through a clear editorial or opinion piece recommending to the audience whom to support. However, during regular campaign coverage the media must refrain from any form of bias.

8. Source Transparency

During an election campaign, when the public is especially sensitive to information about political actors, parties, and the electoral process, source transparency is a fundamental rule of professional journalism. Each piece of information should indicate who the source is, their position, and whether any interest or bias exists. Reliable sources must be used and attributed, with anonymity protected when necessary. A particular challenge in Montenegro is the normalization of so-called "political lies." They are often seen as acceptable, even desirable, if they can harm political opponents. When the media choose not to report such claims, they are often accused of "censorship" or bias.

Without transparency, journalism can easily become a tool of manipulation, and the media, knowingly or unknowingly, may become channels for propaganda or disinformation.

Clear attribution increases trust in the journalist and the outlet and helps audiences detect manipulation. Concealing sources often masks political motives or propaganda.

The Code of Journalists requires journalists to use as many sources as necessary to confirm facts and provide accurate information. Sources should be identified, and when relevant, the context that makes them credible should be provided. Journalists must also assess the affiliations and potential interests of their sources. If a source belongs to or is closely connected to an interest group, that association must be disclosed. The use of indirect sources is acceptable if accompanied by additional verification methods (e.g., documents of confirmed authenticity).

9. Avoiding Hate Speech

The Code of Journalists prohibits the publication of material aimed at inciting hatred or hostility toward individuals based on race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical or mental condition, illness, or political affiliation. The same applies when it is highly likely that publication could provoke such hatred or hostility.

10. Disinformation as a Threat to the Electoral Process

Modern electoral processes face a growing and dangerous threat: disinformation. In Montenegro, this problem has become especially pronounced in recent years, with disinformation agents on social media and tabloid media joining forces to spread false and sensationalist stories. These campaigns are often designed to provoke fear and distrust among voters and have become a defining feature of elections. They significantly influence public perception, the flow of electoral processes, and even the final outcome. Analyses show that disinformation strategies include creating panic through fabricated stories, publishing fake opinion polls, and biased media reporting. These efforts go beyond mere manipulation – they represent a serious attack on the democratic process, affecting voters' right to make informed choices, and undermining the foundations of the political system. Examples from recent years include:

- 2020: False reports about hooligans arriving from Croatia ahead of parliamentary elections.
- 2021: Claims that the government was preparing fire trucks to suppress protests.
- 2023: Fake opinion polls from non-existent Serbian agencies predicting the victory of certain parties, disseminated through selected media to demotivate the opposition.

How Disinformation Spreads During Campaigns

- Closed Viber or WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and bot networks are used to spread fake news, anonymous claims, or doctored videos.
- Anonymous portals and fake websites often disseminate "exclusive information" without providing sources, frequently using sensationalist headlines.
- Manipulation of quotes and images – politicians' statements are often taken out of context, and old photos are reused as if they were current.
- Pseudo-citizen campaigns where "ordinary citizens" share propaganda content while being linked to political structures, NGOs, or PR agencies.
- Publishing results of "polls" without source, methodology, or credibility to shape public opinion.

3 Rules for Media in Montenegro

Public Broadcaster

The public broadcaster, Radio and Television of Montenegro (RTCG), along with local public service broadcasters, is funded from the national budget, meaning it is owned by all citizens. This fact places specific professional and legal obligations on public media, especially during the electoral process. Obligations that have been formally recognized by legislation include:

- Regular and accurate reporting on the electoral process (calendar, conditions, legislative changes).
- Coverage of the campaigns of all relevant political actors.

However, unlike commercial broadcasters, public service media do not have the discretion to evaluate who the "relevant" actors are based on editorial criteria. For them, all participants who have been confirmed by the State Election Commission (SEC) as having met the legal requirements for candidacy are considered relevant.

Accordingly, public broadcasters led by RTCG are obliged to ensure balanced representation of political options and candidates. This does not simply mean equal airtime, but also fairness in context, including the tone of reporting, placement in the news rundown, space for comments and responses, etc.

One of the key responsibilities of the public broadcaster during the campaign is to organize political debates and direct exchanges between candidates. It is not uncommon for electoral actors to avoid this form of political confrontation, especially those who believe they can win votes without risking participation in an impartial, moderated debate. Typically, candidates attempt to avoid debates by setting a variety of preconditions for appearing in the studio, thus creating excuses for not attending. Best practices for organizing debates and candidate confrontations include predefined and publicly available rules on format, participants, and duration, transparent topic selection, and equal technical conditions and treatment for all guests.

If the public broadcaster fails to organize such debates –or organizes them selectively – this is considered a violation of the principles of equal treatment and the public interest.

Foreign Media and Selective Coverage of the Electoral Campaign

In Montenegro, particularly during pre-election periods, there is a noticeable increase in the presence of foreign media outlets and digital portals with unclear ownership and editorial structures. These actors operate outside of established professional and legal media frameworks.

Their activities contribute to an uneven media treatment, favoring certain electoral lists while excluding others, particularly minority and independent candidates. Along with overt bias, their programming often includes the promotion of viewpoints that may qualify as hate speech, dissemination of unverified and false information aimed at discrediting certain electoral participants and their political platforms, and publication of questionable opinion polls without disclosure of sources, samples, or methodologies.

Moreover, these outlets – along with their political allies – exert pressure on domestic media to republish and amplify their content without verification or critical assessment. Typical characteristics

of such portals include the absence of publicly known editorial boards, mastheads, or contact information, as well as exclusive publication of positive content about a single political group, use of negative labeling for opponents, and connections to troll networks that target specific voter groups with disinformation.

A similar role is played by anonymous portals and social media pages that appear shortly before elections and disappear once the campaign is over. Although this practice has been observed in multiple electoral cycles in Montenegro, no competent authority has yet managed to systematically address the issue of these "parallel media structures" nor to resolve the problems they pose. These unregulated outlets can have a serious impact on public opinion formation and the final outcome of elections.

3.1 Rules Applicable to All Media Outlets

In Montenegro, there are several laws and bylaws that regulate how the media may, can, and should report on electoral campaigns.

Before listing them, one important note must be made. This handbook was created at a time when the Parliament of Montenegro was engaged in a process of "comprehensive electoral law reform." This effort has been ongoing, with limited success, for nearly a decade. However, due to commitments made by the executive and legislative branches in the context of accelerating EU accession negotiations, there is now a possibility that this reform will be completed by the end of 2025, or shortly thereafter. This means that some legal provisions mentioned in this text may be subject to change. It is also possible that the electoral model itself will be amended (discussions are ongoing about open lists, direct election of mayors, holding local elections nationwide on a single day, etc.).

Nevertheless, we believe that if such changes do occur, they will bring technical rather than substantive changes from the standpoint of media coverage of the electoral process.

What follows is a concise overview of the most important current legal provisions and regulations that define the rights and responsibilities of the media during election coverage.

Media Law

This law establishes the basic legal framework for the operation of media in Montenegro and therefore governs their conduct during electoral campaigns. Among other things, it emphasizes the following:

- The obligation to inform the public truthfully, fully, and on time (Article 3);
- Responsibility for published content, including the need to clearly distinguish facts from commentary (Articles 4 and 13);
- The right to reply and correct, which is especially important in the context of pre-election disputes and potential inaccuracies in media coverage (Articles 22–24).

These provisions underline the journalist's responsibility to uphold the principles of accuracy, balance, and accountability, even during the election period, and to refrain from transmitting claims that may cause harm without prior verification.

Law on the Election of Councilors and Members of Parliament

This is the primary (umbrella) law governing the electoral process in Montenegro. When it comes to media reporting, some of its most important provisions include:

- The right of citizens to be informed through the media about the electoral programs and activities of electoral list submitters, as well as about the candidates on those lists (Article 6).
- The requirement that media consistently apply the principle of equality for all submitting entities and their candidates.
- Article 51 seeks to ensure equal treatment of electoral actors by prescribing that "public information bodies" are obliged to provide equal access to all election participants for the purpose of informing voters about their programs and activities.
- Article 52 further aims to prevent media favoritism by explicitly stating that "misuse of the media in favor of any election participant is prohibited."

Law on the Financing of Political Entities and Election Campaigns

During the campaign period, media outlets are required to offer political advertising under equal conditions to all political entities. This obligation is outlined in Article 39, which explicitly prohibits discrimination in the provision of advertising services. In addition, Article 38 obliges all media service providers to submit their contracts for political advertising and accompanying price lists to the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption (ASK) within three days of signing such contracts. This ensures transparency regarding market advertising rates and helps prevent illegal campaign subsidies.

The law pays particular attention to the issue of hidden political advertising. According to Article 43, all sponsored content related to political entities must be clearly labeled as political advertising. In practice, this means that media outlets must not present promotional interviews, op-eds, or campaign reports as part of their regular news programming if such content was paid for or initiated by a political entity.

Law on Audiovisual Media Services

The Law on Audiovisual Media Services (Law on AVM) applies to electronic media (television and radio) and contains several provisions relevant to the monitoring of the electoral process. Article 47 reinforces the principles of impartiality and balance, stating that media service providers are obliged to ensure balanced and unbiased reporting.

Political advertising during the pre-election campaign must be clearly labeled and equally accessible to all participants in the electoral process (Articles 91–94). The law also establishes a ban on hidden advertising (Article 68). Additionally, the law defines the role of the Agency for Audiovisual Media Services in supervising the implementation of these rules, including the ability to impose sanctions in cases of violations.

Law on the National Public Broadcaster RTCG

The public media service – RTCG holds a special role in the electoral process due to its legally binding mandate to operate in the public interest.

The law stipulates that RTCG must:

- Ensure equal representation of political entities (Article 4);

- Produce and broadcast special pre-election programming, such as round tables, debates, and presentations of electoral lists, under equal conditions for all list submitters (Articles 2–4);
- It must not misuse its status as a national broadcaster to benefit any political party (Article 9).

The RTCG Council conducts oversight of the implementation of these provisions, while during the electoral campaign, additional supervisory mechanisms include program monitoring by the Agency for Electronic Media (AEM) and the SEC.

Rulebooks and Bylaws

In addition to primary legislation, there are numerous bylaws and rulebooks that provide detailed regulations on media conduct during election campaigns. Some of the key documents include:

- The Rulebook on Political Advertising in Radio and Television Programming, adopted by the AEM, which includes:
 - A ban on favoring candidates through the “tone of reporting”;
 - The duty to log all airtime allocated to campaign participants;
 - The obligation to publish so-called “advertising logs”.
- Guidelines of the SEC on media conduct during the electoral process.
- Guidelines of the RTCG Council on internal organization and monitoring of election-related programming.

These acts often contain precise technical details, from the length of statements to scheduling slots to the manner in which information is presented, and are crucial for editors and producers in electronic media.

3.2 Paid Political Advertising in Electronic Media

The Law on the Election of Councilors and Members of Parliament prohibits discrimination and favoritism (Article 54) and regulates public advertising and the placement of campaign material, which must be provided under equal conditions for all entities, without restricting access to any party (Articles 55 and 56).

The AVM Rulebook on Political Advertising in Radio and Television Programming, includes obligations to:

- Label promotional content (e.g., “paid political advertisement”);
- Provide uniform pricing: all political entities must have the same access and rates for broadcasting ads, and media outlets must not create “offer packages” that favor certain actors;
- Pay attention to the ban on hidden advertising - information of a promotional nature must be separated from informational content;
- Keep records of all aired ads and submit them to AEM after the end of the campaign.

Before the start of the campaign, it is important to publish a clear and accessible price list, visibly label all political ads, maintain precise internal records of all ordered content, ensure adequate space and visibility for all relevant candidates, cooperate with regulators, and provide the necessary information in real-time.

3.3 Direct Addresses and Statements from the SEC in the Electronic Media

Regarding direct addresses and statements from the SEC in electronic media, professional and impartial coverage of the electoral process implies complete and accurate reporting on the activities of the competent authorities involved in the election process. This primarily includes broadcasting statements and addresses from the state and municipal election commissions following the principles of equal treatment and professional standards.

“The State Election Commission, the election commission of the local self-government unit, and the polling board shall inform the public about their work through public media,” states the Law on the Election of Councilors and Members of Parliament (Article 60).

According to the Rulebook on Political Advertising in Radio and Television Programming adopted by AEM ahead of the last parliamentary elections held in Montenegro (2024), statements from the election commission are not considered political propaganda. They are excluded from paid slots designated for the coverage of pre-election activities.

3.4. Obligations of Print and Online Media

The election law does not prescribe specific rules for print and online media. They are required to comply with the law and general journalistic standards.

4 Tips and Guidelines for Election Reporting

4.1 Beginning of the Election Period

Tip 1: Plan within your newsroom how you will cover the elections

Organize election coverage teams. Identify key topics. Use editorial meetings to analyze the political context and citizens' priorities (e.g., economy, healthcare, education, fight against corruption).

Tip 2: Collect information

Before reporting, collect information on all relevant candidates and parties: biographies, platforms, and past results. Use publicly available polls and reports from the NGO sector.

Tip 3: Monitor candidates' media statements and appearances

Regularly follow candidates' public statements in the media — including interviews, press conferences, televised debates, and guest appearances on radio or TV. Pay attention to the consistency of their messaging, their tone toward opponents, and any potentially discriminatory, inappropriate, or misleading claims.

Monitoring media content can help identify violations of electoral rules, hate speech, or manipulative communication strategies. Whenever possible, document the statements with dates and sources, as this may serve as evidence for further analysis or potential complaints to relevant institutions.

Tip 4: Request campaign materials when direct coverage isn't possible

If you cannot attend campaign events in person, contact campaign teams and ask for relevant materials — such as speeches, videos, or press releases. Use them with clear editorial oversight and transparency about the source. Always fact-check and avoid publishing promotional content without critical review to maintain balanced and independent reporting.

4.2 Election Announcement

Tip 5: Understand the legal and regulatory framework of the elections

Before and during the campaign period, make sure to thoroughly familiarize yourself with the relevant electoral legislation and all applicable rules. This includes the Election Law, other key national laws, regulations and guidelines issued by the SEC, and rules on media representation during election campaigns.

Understanding these documents will help you recognize potential violations, apply legal standards in your reporting, and hold candidates and institutions accountable. It also ensures that your coverage is accurate, fair, and aligned with the responsibilities of media in democratic processes. If available, attend training sessions or consult legal experts to clarify complex provisions.

Tip 6: Identify the key institutions in the electoral process:

- Municipal Election Commission (MEC): MECs oversee the process locally.
- State Election Commission (SEC): Responsible for organizing elections and announcing results.
- Parliamentary committees: Oversee the implementation of the law.
- Agency for Audiovisual Media Services (AVM): Regulator for electronic media (TV, radio, and certain segments of digital publications and portals).
- Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that monitor elections, educate citizens, analyze campaigns, and maintain relevant databases on previous electoral processes.

Tip 7: Build a network of sources

Develop professional relationships with party representatives and candidates. Establish cooperation with election observers and relevant institutions. Follow civic initiatives, local activists, and the expert community.

4.3 Election Campaign Period

From the announcement of elections to the start of the pre-election silence period, you must follow the rules for election reporting.

Tip 8: Register potential election participants

Special attention should be paid to those election participants who, despite knowing in advance that they are unlikely to collect the required number of signatures for candidacy or surpass the electoral threshold, still submit their applications in order to gain access to public funds allocated for electoral participation.

Tip 9: Political advertising and covert marketing

Establish a pricing list to ensure that all political entities have the same access and prices for ad broadcasting. Be aware of the ban on covert advertising - all political ads must be clearly labeled.

Tip 10: Ensure fairness when only one party buys ads

If only one political party requests advertising space, especially in large volume, media outlets should take steps to maintain balance and transparency. Clearly label paid content, apply consistent advertising policies, and offer equal opportunities to all parties to avoid the perception of bias and ensure fair election coverage.

Tip 11: Pay attention to incumbent campaigning

Characteristics of incumbent campaigning include promotional activities under the pretext of "regular work," along with additional press conferences emphasizing the "achievements" of the current government. Clearly label the appearances of public officials and, when appropriate, include contrasting views from other election participants, experts, or electoral process evaluators such as the Center for Democratic Transition (CDT) and the Center for Monitoring and Research (CEMI), among others

Tip 12: Pay attention to public opinion polls

Recognize fake or manipulative research. These are typically not conducted by reputable agencies or organizations and should be flagged where the methodology is not explained, the sponsor is unknown, or the way the poll was made public is unclear.

Note: The current Law on the Election of Councilors and Members of Parliament prohibits the publication of opinion poll results five days before the Election Day (Article 51a). This is the so-called "poll blackout period," aimed at preventing manipulation during the final days when voters make their decisions.

Tip 13: Ensure fair and balanced representation of all participants

Carefully plan and organize space and airtime for political content. For television and radio broadcasters, this includes maintaining a balanced presence in news programs, debates, interviews, and other formats.

Tip 14: Monitor tone and language in political messaging

When reporting on political content, pay attention not only to what is said, but also how it is said. The tone and language used can influence public perception, especially if it includes emotional appeals, divisive rhetoric, or subtle targeting of certain groups.

Flag and contextualize any use of inflammatory, discriminatory, or manipulative language to help audiences better understand the deeper impact of campaign communication.

Tip 15: If you are conducting interviews with candidates, prepare well

Research their previous statements, promises, positions held, and results achieved. Prepare questions and data carefully. Ask short, direct, and open-ended questions. Focus on a few key topics and respect the agreed interview duration. Ensure all candidates interviewed are treated equally and given equal time.

Tip 16: Organize fair and well-regulated election debates

If your newsroom decides to organize election debates, provide the debate rules and topics/themes to all participants in advance. Before the debate starts, explain the rules to the audience. Prepare thoroughly, and if participants use problematic language or insult other candidates, interrupt them and state that such language is not acceptable in public discourse. Make sure all participants are treated equally.

Tip 17: Clearly distinguish facts from opinions

Ensure that your reporting clearly separates verified facts from opinions, interpretations, or statements made by political actors. Apply critical analysis, but avoid distortion or bias.

Citizens must be able to easily recognize what is factual information and what reflects a political stance or subjective interpretation. This strengthens media credibility and supports informed decision-making during the campaign.

Tip 18: Always verify the source

Is there an official media report, video recording, audio recording, or transcript in which the claim was made? Is it a statement by a specific politician (name, date, place, and context)?

Journalists are advised to thoroughly verify the credibility and underlying motives of their sources. In instances where revealing a source could jeopardize their safety, employment, or freedom (such as whistleblowers), appropriate measures must be taken to protect their anonymity, for example, by blurring faces or altering voices in television reports. If it is not possible to disclose the source, journalists should communicate the reasons for nondisclosure to the audience to maintain transparency and trust.

Tip 19: Do not share hate speech without critical reflection

If a statement containing hate elements is reported, it must be clearly identified, thoroughly analyzed, and unequivocally condemned. Avoid stereotypes and emotionally charged expressions such as "them", "ours", and "traitors".

Tip 20: Be cautious when using content from social media

Viral posts often contain false or misleading information – do not share them without prior verification.

Tip 21: Regularly moderate comments on your portal accounts

If you believe an article may attract hate speech or large numbers of party-affiliated trolls, disable commenting. Internally define newsroom moderation policies for social media accounts. If you cannot moderate comments, disable commenting or refrain from sharing the article on social media.

Tip 22: Manage and restrict political ads on your website

To prevent Google political ads from appearing on your website, coordinate with your website administrator to set up restrictions based on specific keywords or tags related to political content. This will help filter out unwanted political advertisements and maintain a neutral user experience.

Alternatively, if you prefer to avoid all Google Ads, you can choose to disable the ad service entirely on your site. This approach gives you full control over the type of content and ads your visitors see, ensuring your platform remains free from political advertising influence.

Tip 23: Do not rush to publish

It is better to wait and publish accurate information than to be the first with false information.

Tip 24: Use gender-sensitive language and avoid stereotypes in reporting

When reporting on political campaigns and public affairs, it is essential to avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes. Use gender-sensitive language consistently to promote equality and fair representation of all genders. This means avoiding assumptions or clichés that limit how individuals are portrayed based on their gender.

Using inclusive language not only improves the visibility of women and marginalized groups in the public sphere, but also helps challenge existing biases and encourages a more balanced and respectful public discourse. Aim to highlight achievements and qualities without resorting to stereotypes, and be mindful of pronouns, titles, and descriptors.

4.4 Election Silence

Tip 25: Respect the pre-election silence period

Keep in mind that the Law on the Election of Councilors and Members of Parliament stipulates that political propaganda through media and public gatherings is prohibited 48 hours before Election Day and throughout Election Day itself.

During this same period, it is also forbidden to publish polls, candidate statements, political ads, or any promotional content related to the elections.

Tip 26: Avoid publishing biased analyses

Editorials, analyses, and commentaries must be grounded in facts and professional standards. Avoid publishing content that pretends to be neutral but actually promotes a political actor or party. Clearly separate opinion from reporting and maintain political neutrality, especially during sensitive periods like election campaigns.

Tip 27: Establish clear Internal rules for the silence period

Content and articles should be planned to avoid mistakes and oversights. Special attention must be paid to propaganda messages published during the silence period to ensure that covert political content is not disseminated through them.

With the development of technology and social media, this mechanism for "protecting voters" has become highly questionable. Since algorithms and advertising on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are not subject to Montenegrin regulations, political parties and candidates often pre-schedule sponsored posts that are automatically shown even on Election Day. These posts are often targeted based on voters' location, interests, and behavior – which further amplifies their impact.

Some media outlets registered abroad (especially in the region) continue to publish interviews, polls, and endorsements of candidates. Although their content is shared within Montenegro, regulatory authorities do not have jurisdiction over them.

4.5 Election Day and Vote Counting

Tip 28: Coordinate key election day information

Determine in advance the schedule for announcements from the SEC, domestic and international election observers, and NGO organizations monitoring the electoral process, such as CEMI and CDT, as well as the times and locations where electoral list leaders and presidential candidates will cast their votes.

Tip 29: Follow accreditation procedures

Ensure that all journalists, photographers, and camera crews are accredited in accordance with guidelines issued by the election commission. Whenever possible, position media crews in the headquarters of major political parties to capture real-time reactions and developments on Election Day.

Tip 30: Respect voters' privacy

Filming or photographing voters inside polling stations should only be done with their clear and explicit consent. Avoid showing voters' faces or choices without permission. Respect for privacy is both a legal and ethical obligation, and essential for maintaining public trust in media coverage.

Tip 31: Maintain communication with election officials

Establish clear communication channels with polling station staff and accredited election observers. These sources are crucial for confirming developments, verifying irregularities, and gaining access to official information throughout Election Day.

Tip 32: Engage with independent observers and institutions

Maintain regular contact with civil society organizations, election monitoring groups, and relevant institutions. Their insights can provide independent verification of events and enrich your reporting with diverse and credible perspectives.

Tip 33: Handle irregularity reports responsibly

Carefully verify all reports of election-day irregularities, especially those involving polling stations or voter intimidation. Avoid publishing unconfirmed claims, as they can cause unnecessary panic or undermine public trust in the electoral process.

Tip 34: Withhold candidate statements until polls close

If candidates make public statements after voting, those statements should not be published or broadcast until polling stations are closed. This helps avoid influencing voters who have not yet cast their ballots and aligns with election regulations.

Tip 35: Publish only official and verified data

Rely on official sources such as the SEC, CDT, and other authorized bodies for publishing turnout statistics and results. Political parties may share their own data to mobilize supporters, but these figures should be clearly labeled and contextualized as unofficial.

Tip 36: Clearly label preliminary results

When reporting early returns or projections, explicitly state that these are preliminary and subject to official confirmation. Avoid presenting partial data as final results, which may mislead the public and create confusion.

Tip 37: Ensure balanced TV programming on Election Day

In election-day broadcasts, confirm guests in advance to avoid last-minute bias. Ensure political diversity and include analysts who can provide context without promoting specific agendas. Be mindful of the silence period and avoid indirect campaigning through guest commentary.

Tip 38: Use clear and comparative visuals

Create simple, clear graphics to present vote shares, seat distribution, and comparisons with previous elections. Visuals help viewers and readers understand the broader context and impact of election results more easily.

Tip 39: Analyze results in a broader context

Go beyond who won or lost. Explore what the results mean for citizens, institutions, and future policymaking. Explain shifts in voter behavior or changes in political dynamics to help audiences grasp the bigger picture.

Tip 40: Include diverse expert voices

Bring in political scientists, sociologists, legal experts, and economists to interpret results from multiple perspectives. This helps audiences understand how election outcomes affect society beyond party politics.

Tip 41: Report reactions evenly

Give fair space to reactions from all relevant political actors. Avoid overrepresenting one side, especially in early reporting, and ensure that even smaller parties or independents have a voice in post-election coverage.

Tip 42: Give voice to civil society

Include commentary and reactions from civic initiatives and NGOs. Their perspectives contribute to a fuller understanding of how the elections affect public life and democratic development.

Tip 43: Track complaints and legal proceedings

Monitor and report on complaints filed with election commissions and courts. Cover these developments factually and professionally, and provide updates on decisions or outcomes.

Tip 44: Investigate irregularities thoroughly

Use investigative tools to assess the validity of complaints or incidents. Determine whether irregularities had a material impact on results and report findings transparently and responsibly.

Tip 45: Correct errors transparently

If you publish inaccurate or misleading information, issue a correction as soon as possible. Explain how the error occurred and what was done to fix it. Transparency reinforces public trust and editorial accountability.

Glossary of Terms

Advertising Contracts: Formal agreements between political entities and media outlets for the purchase of ad space, submitted to AEM or ASK within a prescribed deadline.

Balanced Reporting: Fair and even-handed treatment of all political actors in terms of airtime, tone, presentation, and choice of interviewees.

Balance: A journalistic principle requiring the representation of different sides in reporting, especially in a political context.

Bylaws: Regulations and instructions (from SEC, AEM, RTCG Council) that define in detail the media's conduct during the campaign.

Bot: An automated social media account operated by an algorithm rather than a real person, designed to publish information without human influence.

Campaign Plan: A strategic schedule of topics, events, interviews, and content that a media outlet plans to implement during an election campaign.

Direct Election: An electoral model in which citizens vote directly for a candidate (e.g., president), as opposed to indirect election via political representatives.

Digital Advertising: Promotional content paid for display on social media and other online platforms, which often escape regulation and lack transparency.

Discrimination: Unequal treatment of individuals or groups based on personal characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, political belief, etc.

Disinformation: Deliberately misleading information intended to manipulate voters, discredit individuals or parties, and obscure the truth.

Election Campaign: A period in which political entities present their positions and programs to the public to win voter support.

Election Silence: A legally mandated 48-hour period before voting during which political propaganda and publishing of opinion polls are prohibited.

Equal Representation: The principle that political entities and candidates should receive roughly equal media space during the election campaign.

Fact-Checking: Verifying facts by confirming sources, analyzing claims, and comparing them with available data and official documents.

Fake News: News and stories created with the intent to deliberately misinform or deceive readers.

Foreign Media: Media outlets registered outside Montenegro, which, lacking clear regulation, may influence domestic electoral narratives.

Freedom of Expression: A fundamental human right allowing individuals to express opinions freely, with accountability, and within legal boundaries.

Functionary Campaigning: The use of public office and resources (not relevant to the campaign itself) for political purposes during the pre-election period.

Impartiality: A feature of objective journalism that involves avoiding political bias and presenting diverse viewpoints fairly.

Internet Troll: A person who posts deliberately provocative messages online to provoke emotional responses from others.

Information Channels: Various formats (TV, radio, online, print) through which election-related content and advertisements are disseminated.

Information Placement (Spinning): Deliberate shaping and delivering of information in a way that benefits one side, often involving distortion of facts.

Journalist Accreditation: The procedure and permission granted by the electoral commission that allows journalists to access polling stations, campaign headquarters, and designated media conferences to report on election day developments and election results.

Journalistic Responsibility: The obligation of journalists to report truthfully, respect human rights, and avoid harm to the public interest.

Media Literacy: The ability of citizens to critically analyze media content, recognize manipulation and disinformation, and distinguish fact from opinion.

Media Monitoring: The systematic tracking and analysis of media coverage, often during elections, to assess balance, accuracy, and legal compliance.

MEC (Municipal Election Commission): A local body that organizes and supervises election activities within its municipality.

Online Disinformation: False or manipulative content distributed via digital platforms, often using algorithmic targeting.

Political Advertising: All forms of promotion of political actors under equal conditions and clearly marked as paid content.

Political Marketing: A set of strategies and communication activities used by political entities to influence voters.

Public Broadcaster (RTCG): A state-owned media outlet tasked with informing the public objectively, evenly, and impartially throughout the electoral process, without favoritism.

Public Interest: The general interest of the community that transcends individual or party interests and should be the primary motivation in media work.

Public Opinion Research: The professional and transparent conduct of surveys aimed at understanding voter attitudes without manipulating results.

Regulatory Bodies: Institutions responsible for supervising and regulating media conduct and ensuring compliance with public information laws.

Reporting Tone: The manner of presenting a topic - emotional, neutral, critical - which can affect perceptions of impartiality.

Results Analysis: Expert interpretation of exit polls and post-election figures within a broader social and political context.

Right of Reply: The legal right of individuals or institutions to respond to inaccurate or harmful claims published in the media.

RTCG Guidelines: Rules governing equality and structure of election programming by the national public broadcaster.

SEC (State Election Commission): An independent body responsible for organizing, overseeing, and controlling elections in Montenegro. It announces elections, verifies candidacies, handles complaints, and publishes official results.

Source Transparency: Clear identification of the source, its potential interests, and the context in which the information was provided.

Voting Rights: The constitutional right of citizens to vote and to be elected in democratic elections.

Whistleblower: A person who reports, exposes, or discloses information about illegal, unethical, or harmful activities within an organization or institution where they are currently or were previously employed. Whistleblowers typically reveal such information to the public, competent authorities, or some form of oversight body in order to uncover and prevent corruption.

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