

Online Media Monitoring in the Election Campaign for 2020 Presidential Elections

Report no. 4
18 – 24 October 2020

(general conclusions)



National Endowment *for* Democracy
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The monitoring takes place within a project implemented by the Association of Independent Press (API) and funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (USA). The opinions expressed therein belong to the authors and do not necessarily reflect the point of view of the donor.

I. GENERAL DATA

1.1 Objective of the project: monitor and inform the public about the editorial behaviour of (online) media in the pre-election period and during the campaign for the 2020 presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova.

1.2 Monitoring period: 15 September 2020 – 14 November 2020.

1.3 Criteria for selecting the media outlets to be monitored:

The portals were selected based on the following criteria: a) relevance; b) fame/audience; c) broadcasting language; d) geography. We are thus monitoring national portals and one regional portal, in Romanian and Russian, known and indicated as sources of information by different groups of consumers, with some present in the top positions of online audience measurement surveys.

1.4 Portals monitored (in alphabetical order):

Actualitati.md¹ (Russian), Agora.md² (Romanian), Aif.md³ (Russian), Gagauzinfo.md⁴ (Russian), Kp.md⁵ (Russian), Newsmaker.md⁶ (Russian language version), Noi.md⁷ (Romanian language version), Realitatea.md⁸ (Romanian), Sputnik.md⁹ (Romanian), Timpul.md¹⁰ (Romanian), Unimedia.info¹¹ (Romanian), Vedomosti.md¹² (Russian).

For Aif.md, Kp.md and Vedomosti.md, the editorial content of the portals is compared with the content of the newspapers *Argumentî i faktî Moldova*, *Komsomolskaia pravda v Moldove* and *Moldavskie vedomosti*, accordingly, published by the same companies, to identify eventual editorial differences.

1.5 Subject-matter of monitoring

The entire editorial content, without the publicity marked accordingly.

1.6. The team

The project is implemented by the Association of Independent Press (API) within the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections.

¹ Founded by **Iuri Vitneanski**, PSRM member, currently vice praetor of Botanica district of Chişinău

² Founded by Interakt Media SRL (administrator – **Irina Ghelbur**)

³ Electronic page of the newspaper *Argumentî i Faktî Moldova*, published by Exclusiv Media SRL, company founded by the MP from PSRM **Corneliu Furculiţă**

⁴ Founded by Iusivmedia SRL (administrator – **Iulia Cîlcic**)

⁵ Electronic page of the newspaper *Komsomolskaia Pravda v Moldove*, published by “Komsomoliskaya Pravda-Basarabia” SRL (administrator – **Serghei Ciuricov**), company’s founder – Exclusiv Media SRL, a company founded by the MP from PSRM **Corneliu Furculiţă**

⁶ Founded by NEWSMAKER SRL, a company founded by **Vladimir Soloviov** (administrator – **Olga Cenuşa**)

⁷ Founded by MLD Media SRL, a company with six shareholders, including companies of the businessman **Vasile Chirtoca**, PSRM councilor in Chişinău Municipal Council

⁸ Founded by HB MEDIA SRL (administrator – **Dumitru Țira**)

⁹ Branch of Sputnik International Press and Radio Agency, founded by the Russian state company Russia Segodnea (Sputnik Moldova director – **Vladimir Novosadiuc**)

¹⁰ Founded by the Periodical Publication *TIMPUL de dimineaţă*, founded by **Constantin Tănase** (administrator – **Silviu Tănase**)

¹¹ Founded by Miraza SRL (administrator – **Olesea Banari**)

¹² Electronic page of the newspaper *Moldavskie vedomosti*, founded by “Moldavskie vedomosti” SRL (administrator – **Victor Ciobu**)

1.7 Methodological framework

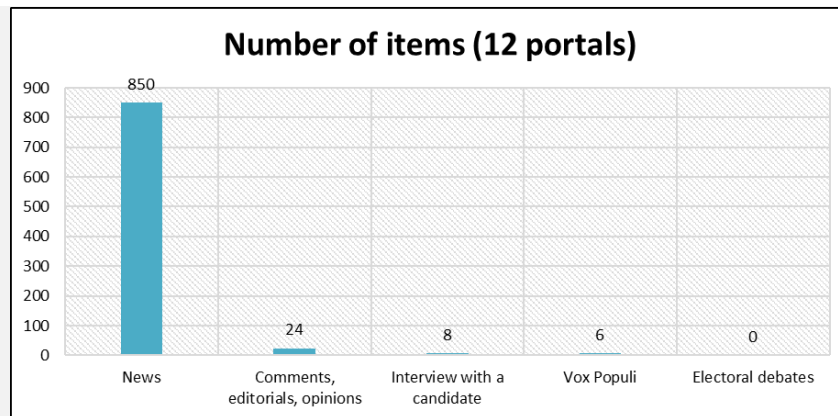
The monitoring is based on the methodology developed by Oxford Media Research Centre for the monitoring projects of the international organization Article 19: Global Campaign for Free Expression. The same methodology was used for monitoring media outlets in the election period and campaign for the 2016 presidential elections.

The methodology provides for measuring and review of the following indicators: 1) *quantitative*, including type, duration, topic of coverage, protagonists and news sources, frequency and duration of live appearance of election candidates, and 2) *qualitative*, establishing the context of presentation of the candidates in the media reports. Each news item or opinion is subject to a content and context evaluation, to determine if it favours or disfavors one or another election candidate. A positive or negative news content and/or context does not necessarily show bias or partisanship of the media outlet that airs the news. It is possible for the news to favour or disfavour one of the subjects and, yet, be professionally unbiased and correct. **When assessing the context, only the frequency of items that directly or indirectly favour or disfavour the election subjects is measured.**

II. DATA ANALYSIS

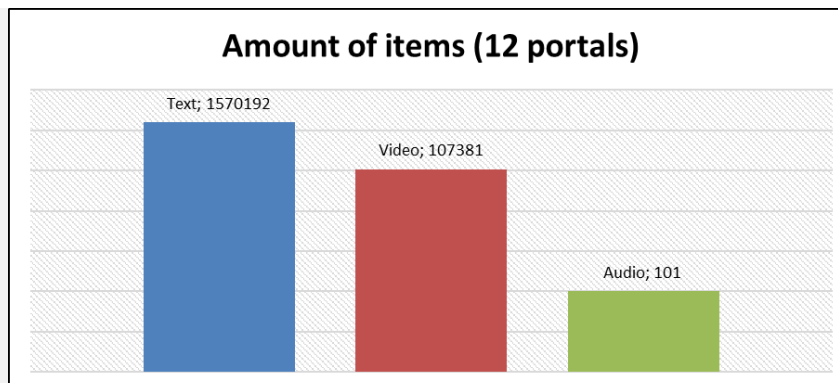
2.1 General trends

Between 18 and 24 October 2020, the twelve online media outlets monitored cumulatively published 888 items that directly or indirectly targeted the campaign for presidential elections. Of the total number of items, most were news stories (850 or 95.7%), which targeted the male/female candidates for the position of president, the political entities they represent, the CEC work, electoral actions, etc. Other 24 items, or 2.7% of the total, were published in the form of comments, editorials or other opinion stories, eight (0.9%) were interviews with a male/female candidate and six (or 0.7%) took the form of Vox Populi polls.



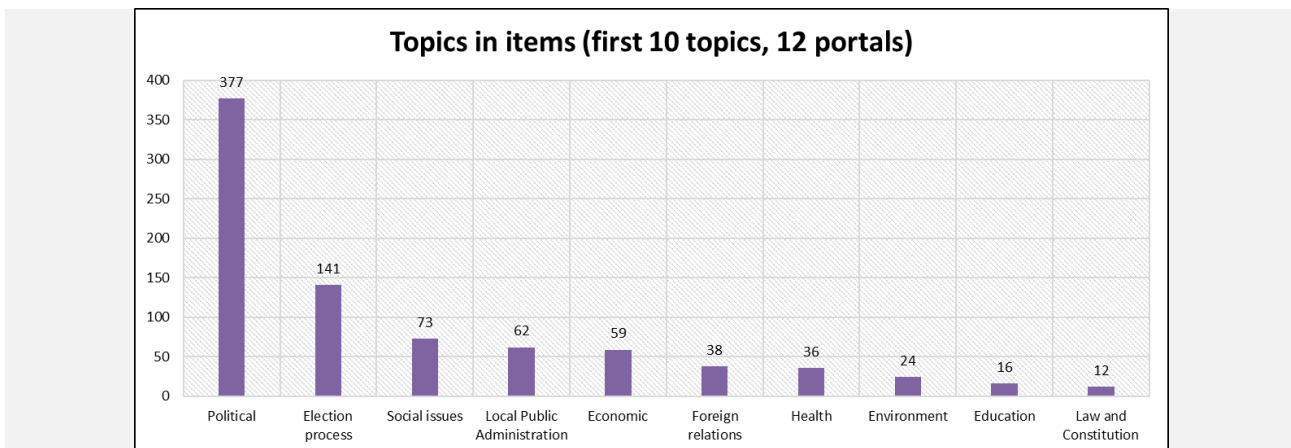
The publication **Noi.md** further had the largest number of items with a political and election character (156), and **Gagauzinfo.md** published the smallest number of such stories (8). At the same time, **Aif.md** stood out with 112 relevant products; **Actualitati.md** - with 107; **Agora.md** - with 94; **Kp.md** - with 86; **Unimedia.info** - with 78; **Vedomosti.md** - with 75; **Sputnik.md** - with 68; **Newsmaker.md** - with 49; **Realitatea.md** - with 35; and **Timpul.md** - with 20 items. At the same time, **Noi.md** published the most election news stories (151); **Vedomosti.md** and **Kp.md** had the most comments and other opinion items (7 each); and **Unimedia.info** and **Newsmaker.md** equally divided the eight interviews with a male/female candidate published during this period (4 each). As concerns the Vox Populi opinion polls, one was published by **Timpul.md**, and five - by **Agora.md**.

Most of the items were again in text format (888 cases). During the reference period, the number of items accompanied by video images increased (119), and in one case, it was also accompanied by an audio. The volume of items monitored was thus quantified in characters (text) and seconds (video and audio), as follows:

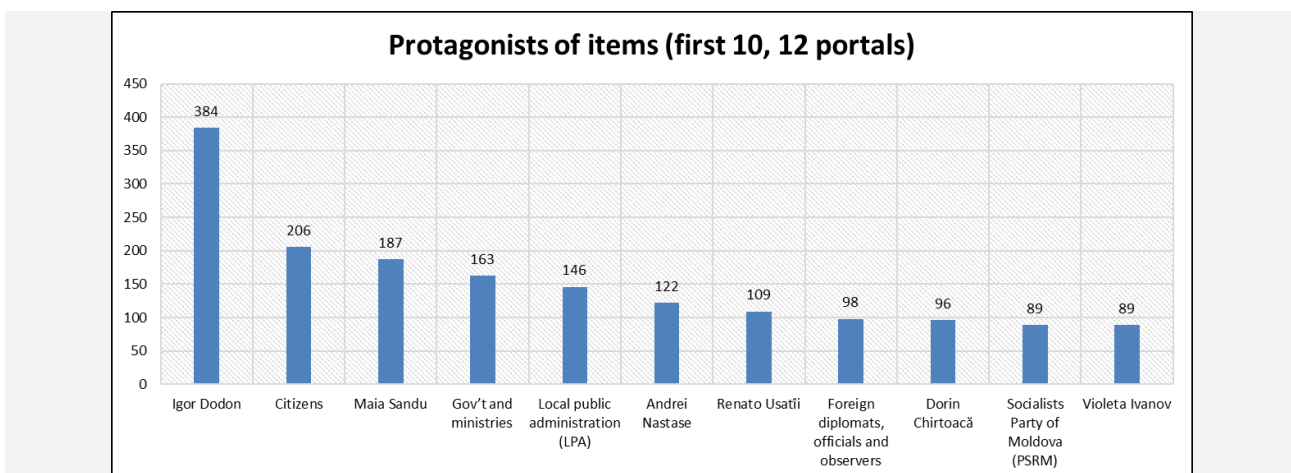


Over 40% of the media reports monitored tackled political issues. Issues concerning the election process positioned themselves at a significant distance, with about 16% of total items

focusing on them. Other topics, such as social issues, the work of local public administration, economy, foreign relations, healthcare or education were addressed less often in a direct or indirect election context during the period monitored by the twelve online media outlets.

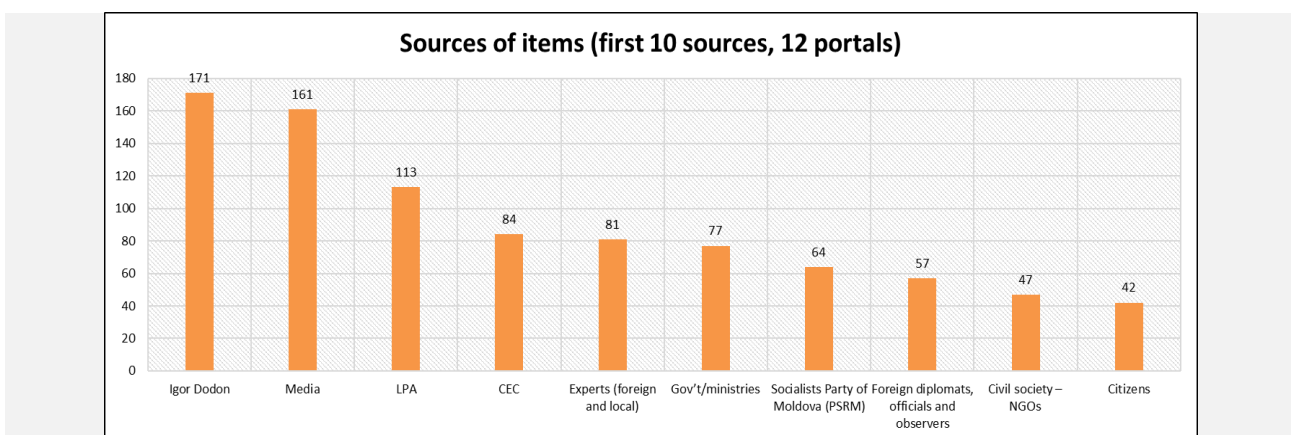


Between 18 and 24 October, all six male candidates and the two female candidates registered in the race for presidential election were the protagonists of the items published by the websites concerned. Most often in this capacity appeared the independent candidate supported by the Socialists Party (PSRM) Igor Dodon who was the protagonist of 384 items, still holding the lead among all categories of male/female protagonists targeted. The candidate of the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) Maia Sandu followed, after male/female citizens (who appeared as protagonists 206 times), with 187 appearances as a protagonist, or nearly half less than the first ranked. The following candidate, that of the Political Party "Platform of Justice and Truth" (PPDA), Andrei Năstase, with 122 appearances, appeared as a protagonist less often than the male/female representatives of the Government or of the local public administration, but more often than the candidate of the Political Party "Our Party" (PN) Renato Usatîi, who was the protagonist of 109 items. The other male candidates and one female candidate were the protagonists as follows: Dorin Chirtoacă from the Liberal Party (PL) – 96 times; Violeta Ivanov, candidate of the "Șor" Political Party – 89 times; Tudor Deliu from the Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova (PLDM) – 85 times; and Octavian Țîcu from the Political Party "National Unity Party" (PUN) – 83 times. Hence, the candidate Igor Dodon appeared almost 5 times more often as an item protagonist than Octavian Țîcu.

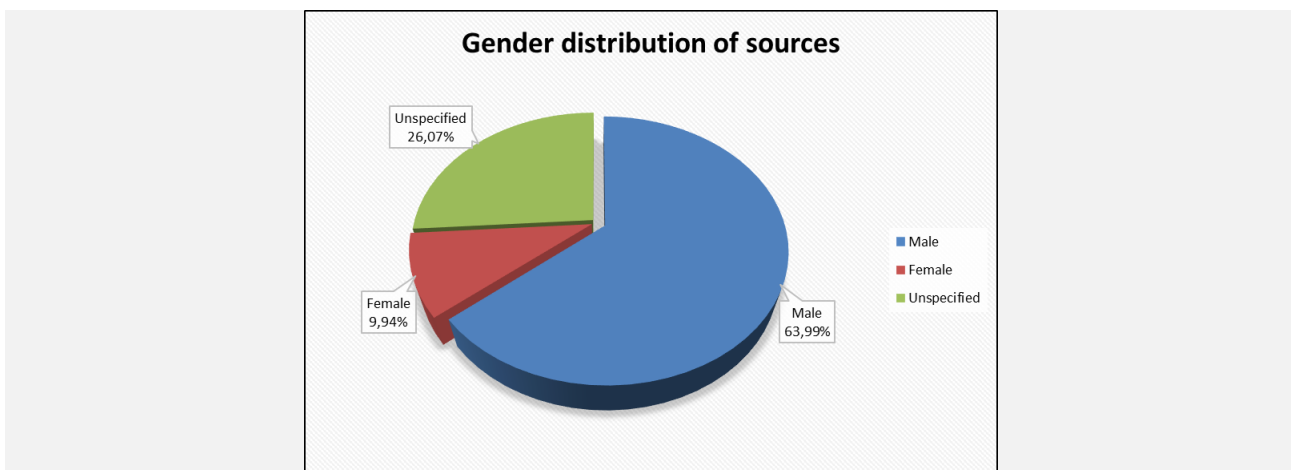


Cumulatively, the twelve online publications quoted 1147 sources, the candidate Igor Dodon ranking first again, with 170 cases in which he appeared in such a capacity, further remaining the only candidate for president who was in the top 10 most frequently quoted sources by the

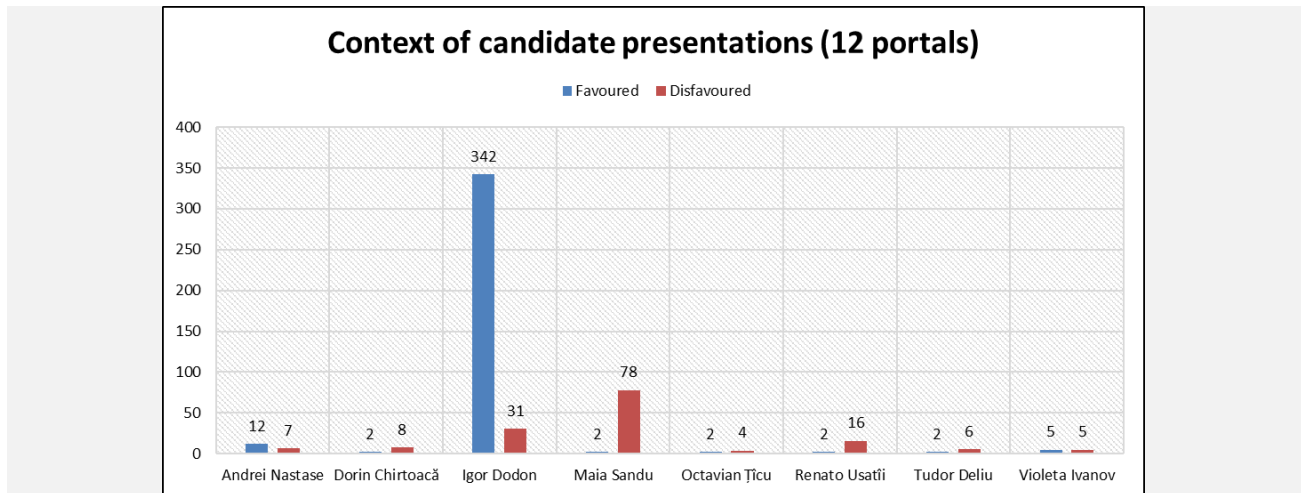
publications concerned. He was followed, at a short distance, by other media sources, quoted 161 times by them as well as by the male/female representatives of local public administration (113 times). Less frequently were quoted the members of the Central Election Commission (CEC) (84 times), foreign/local male and female experts (in 81 cases), male/female members of the Government (77 times), or foreign male/female diplomats (57 times). PSRM stood out once again among the parties, its male/female members being quoted 64 times. The other five male candidates and the two female candidates for the supreme position appeared much less frequently as sources of information, as follows: Andrei Năstase - 20 times; Maia Sandu - 15 times; Octavian Țicu - 10 times; Dorin Chirtoacă and Renato Usatî - 9 times; Violeta Ivanov - 8 times; and Tudor Deliu - 5 times. In this case, Igor Dodon was quoted in media reports over 34 times more often than Tudor Deliu.



As in previous reporting periods, the media stories lacked balance in terms of gender, with nearly 64% of the sources quoted being men and almost 10% women, and with around 26% remaining unspecified.



Similarly, Igor Dodon remained the candidate with the highest visibility in the online media monitored, being the one presented massively in a positive context (342 times). This time, the other male candidates as well as the two female candidates appeared in favourable contexts but in insignificant numbers as compared to Igor Dodon (such appearances varied between 2 and 12 times). On the other hand, the candidate Maia Sandu further appeared most often in a negative context that disadvantaged her (78 times), with the other male candidates and one female candidate appearing in a smaller number of disadvantageous items, including Igor Dodon - 31 times; Renato Usatî - 16 times, etc.

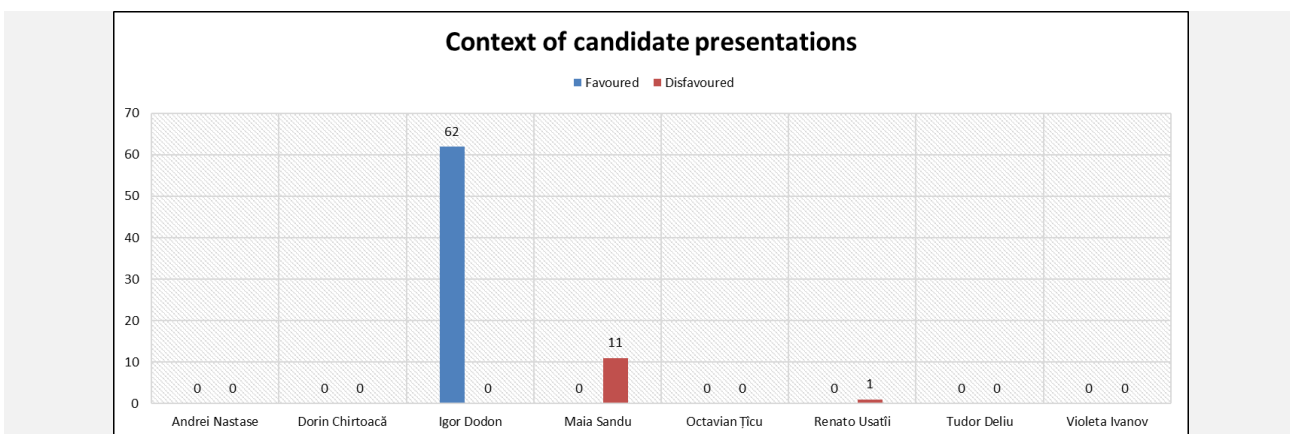


In conclusion, following the monitoring of the editorial behaviour of the twelve online media outlets between 18 and 24 October 2020, the following trends can be established:

- **Actualitati.md**, **Aif.md** and **Kp.md** had a similar editorial behaviour in this reporting period as well, with pronounced elements of bias, favouring and promoting the independent candidate supported by PSRM Igor Dodon. The PAS candidate Maia Sandu was further disadvantaged by the three publications but in a less aggressive manner as compared to the previous reporting periods. However, **Kp.md** published items in which both Maia Sandu and two other candidates (Dorin Chirtoacă and Renato Usatîi) were labelled in a derogatory manner, without being granted the right of reply.
- **Noi.md**, **Sputnik.md** and **Vedomosti.md** further favoured Igor Dodon through the coverage tone and presentation in positive contexts. At the same time, the PAS candidate Maia Sandu as well as the PN candidate Renato Usatîi appeared most often in unfavourable contexts in the items of the three publications (the last one especially on **Vedomosti.md**).
- **Gagauzinfo.md** continued to pay little attention to the election campaign and its news referred to the election process as a whole, as well as to the political area.
- **Unimedia.info** covered the election process and the activities of the male/female candidates, placing most often Igor Dodon and Andrei Năstase as well as Violeta Ivanov in favourable contexts.
- **Agora.md** and **Newsmaker.md** had a relatively balanced editorial policy, the authors of the items being generally impartial, and the male and female candidates for the position of president were presented most of the time in neutral contexts, but also in positive or negative ones; however, without a clear tendency of favouring or disfavouring them. **Newsmaker.md** had the most balanced editorial behaviour in the period concerned.
- **Realitatea.md** covered all male candidates and the two female candidates for the position of president both neutrally and positively, or negatively. The candidate Igor Dodon appeared most of the time in an unfavourable context.
- The items published by **Timpul.md** targeted all male candidates and the two female candidates, Igor Dodon appearing most often in a context that did not favour him.

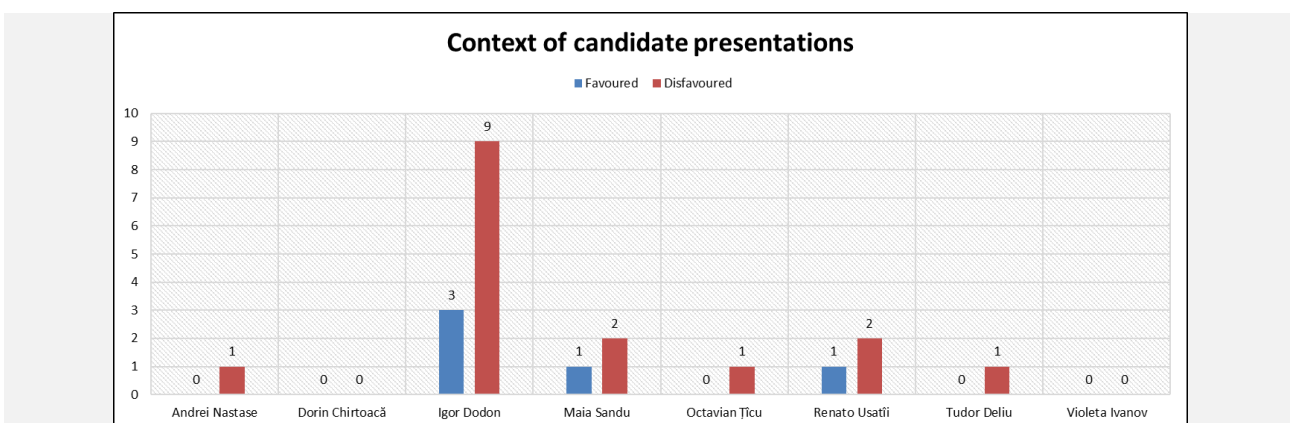
2.2 Editorial behaviour of the publications

In the period from 18 to 24 October, the candidate Dorin Chirtoacă was completely ignored by **Actualități.md**, his campaign actions missing from this publication's electoral items. Three other candidates: Andrei Năstase, Octavian Țicu and Tudor Deliu as well as the candidate Violeta Ivanov appeared in neutral contexts in the items that concerned them. At the same time, the candidate Igor Dodon further enjoyed a substantial and exclusively positive presentation (62 times). His campaign actions, including statements, opinions on various topics, meetings with citizens, etc. were widely covered in favour of the independent candidate supported by PSRM. Although less aggressive than in previous reporting periods, **Actualitati.md** most often disadvantaged Maia Sandu (11 times). Renato Usatîi also appeared once in a rather unfavourable context.

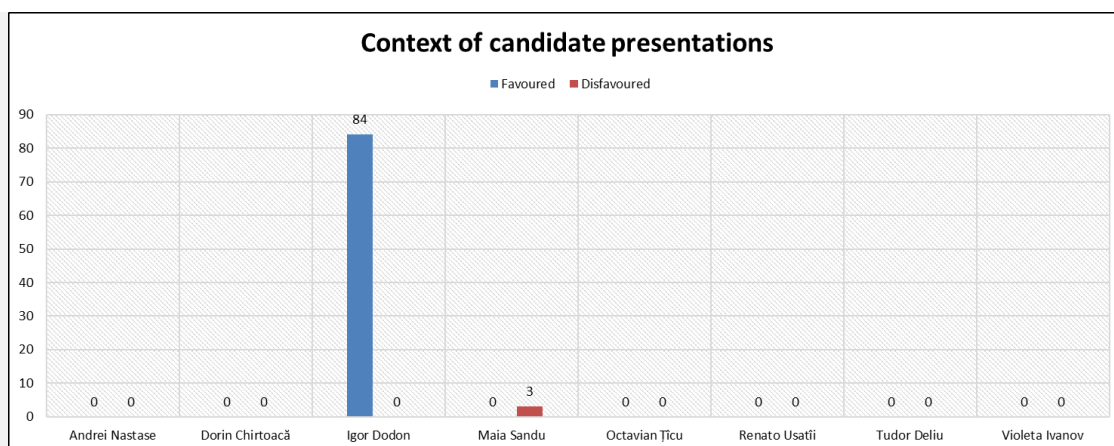


Agora.md

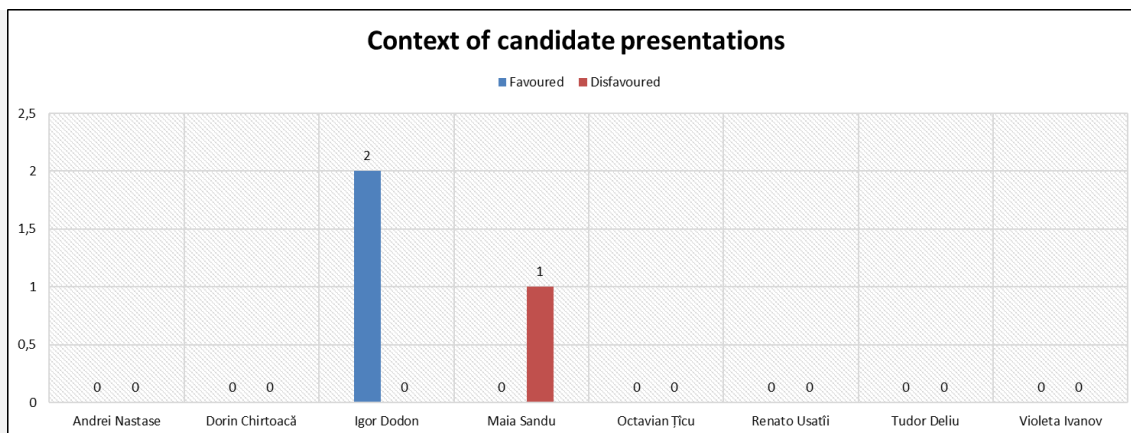
Although without a clear tendency to favour or disfavour a candidate for the position of president, **Agora.md** placed most of them in both neutral and positive contexts, and in rather negative ones. When favouring/disfavouring a candidate, the second source (or the male/female candidate concerned) was missing each time in conflicting stories. In the same connection, the candidates Dorin Chirtoacă and Violeta Ivanov appeared only in neutral contexts. Igor Dodon, in his turn, had the most placements both in rather unfavourable contexts (9 times) and in rather favourable ones (3 times). Maia Sandu and Renato Usatîi each had two appearances in negative contexts and one in rather positive contexts. At the same time, Andrei Năstase, Octavian Țicu and Tudor Deliu each were disadvantaged once.



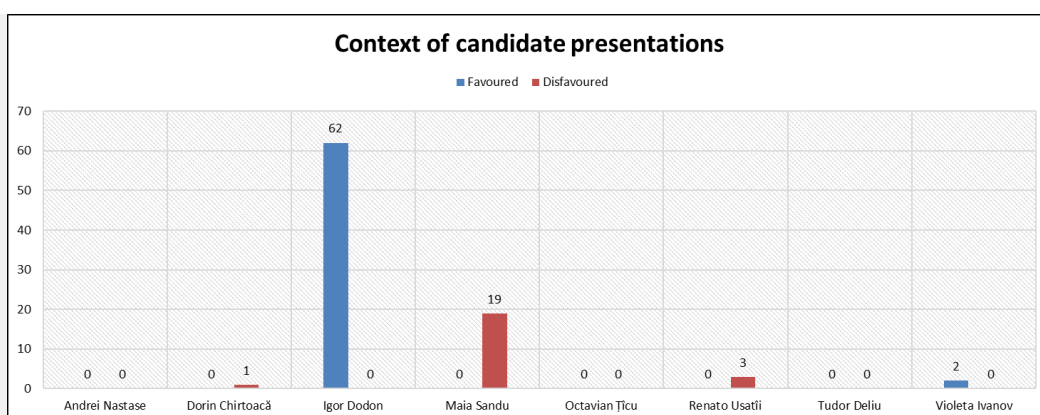
Between 18 and 24 October 2020, **Aif.md** further openly and substantially promoted Igor Dodon, through both a large number of items that concerned his campaign activities and an exclusively positive context in which he was placed. More precisely, Igor Dodon was favoured 84 times in the stories that targeted him directly or indirectly, remaining the only candidate who appeared in a positive context in **Aif.md** stories. At the same time, there were fewer assaults on the other candidates, Maia Sandu being the only one who appeared in rather unfavourable contexts (3 times). The other candidates appeared in neutral contexts in the few cases in which they were concerned by **Aif.md** items.



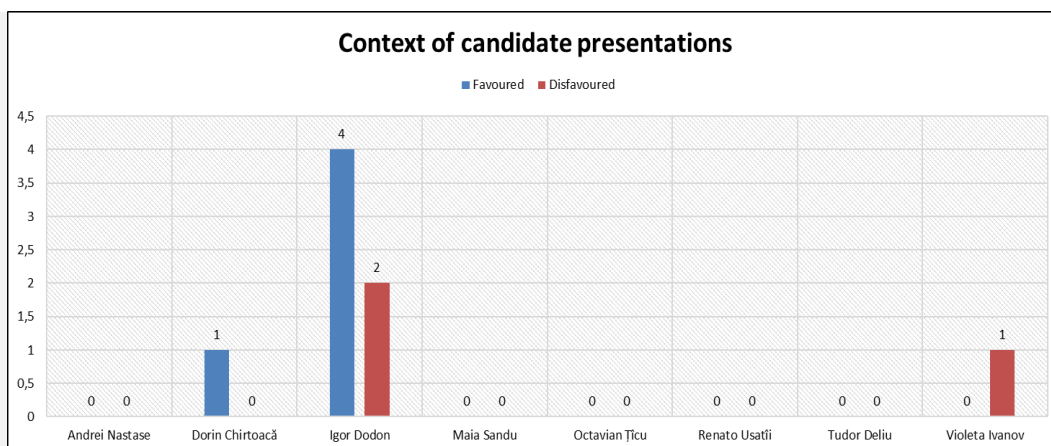
The **Gagauzinfo.md** publication during the reference period ignored the electoral actions of the candidates Dorin Chirtoacă and Andrei Năstase. Candidates Octavian Țicu, Renato Usatîi, Tudor Deliu as well as Violeta Ivanov appeared in neutral contexts, and Maia Sandu was rather disadvantaged in a story, while Igor Dodon appeared twice in rather positive contexts.



Between 18 and 24 October 2020, the **Kp.md** publication continued to favour Igor Dodon. He appeared 62 times in an exclusively positive light both in the items that covered his campaign actions and in those in which he was opposed to other candidates. The candidate Violeta Ivanov appeared twice also in rather favourable contexts, including in an item with an obvious election character but without being properly marked as such. At the same time, two candidates, Dorin Chirtoacă and Renato Usatîi as well as the candidate Maia Sandu, were disadvantaged. The last one appeared most often in such a context (19 times), both she and Dorin Chirtoacă being assigned derogatory qualifications, without being offered the right of reply. In addition, the candidates Andrei Năstase, Octavian Țicu and Tudor Deliu were placed in neutral contexts in the few items that concerned them.



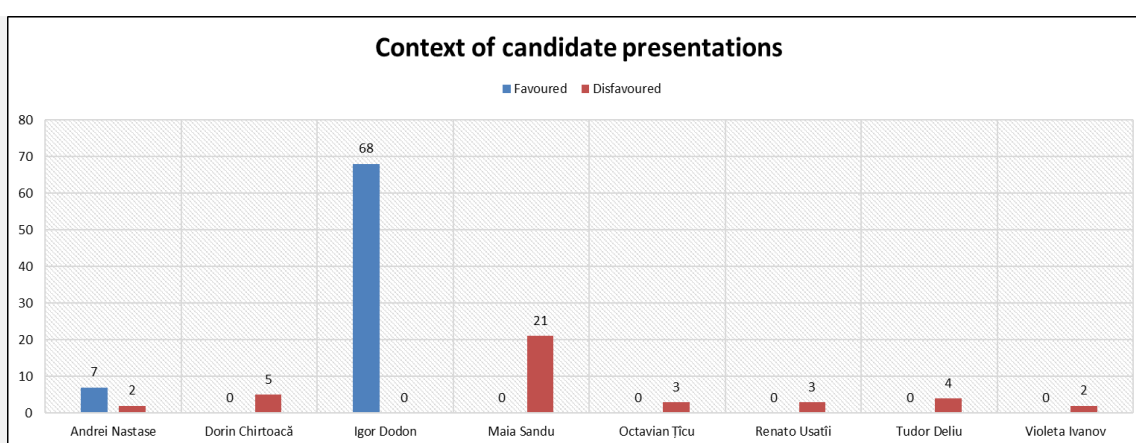
Between 18 and 24 October 2020, **Newsmaker.md** generally presented the candidates for the position of president of the Republic of Moldova in a balanced manner. Four candidates – Andrei Năstase, Octavian Țicu, Renato Usatîi and Tudor Deliu as well as Maia Sandu enjoyed neutral media coverage in the items that concerned them. Dorin Chirtoacă once appeared in a context that rather favoured him, and Violeta Ivanov was once covered in a context that rather disadvantaged her indirectly. In his turn, Igor Dodon was placed four times in contexts that favoured him directly or indirectly and twice in rather unfavourable contexts. Further, however, no obvious tendency to promote someone in a positive or negative way was found.





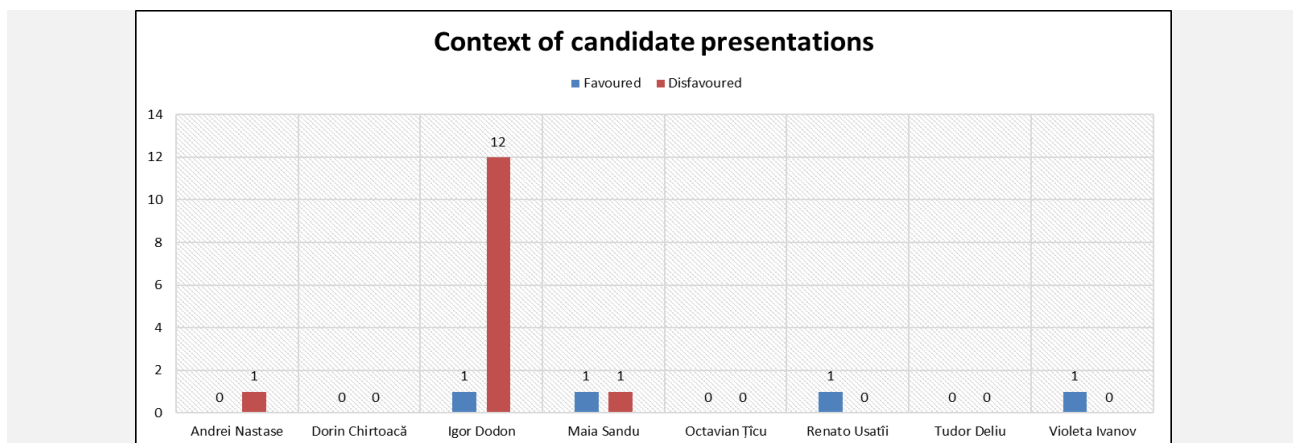
[Noi.md](#)

During the reporting period, the online publication **Noi.md** further clearly favoured the candidate Igor Dodon who appeared 68 times in exclusively favourable contexts, being the only beneficiary with such treatment. Another candidate who (also) appeared in favourable positions was Andrei Năstase (7 times). The stories about his election program, with promises, appeared in the news sections and not in the electoral advertising ones. Năstase, however, was also placed twice in rather unfavourable contexts. The other male candidates and the two female candidates were disadvantaged in a smaller or larger number of cases, Maia Sandu appearing most often in such contexts (21 times). As in previous reporting periods, in order to disadvantage certain candidates, **Noi.md** covered the mutual attacks of the candidates or of their representatives. The allegations brought against some candidates were not balanced with the opinion/position of the person concerned.



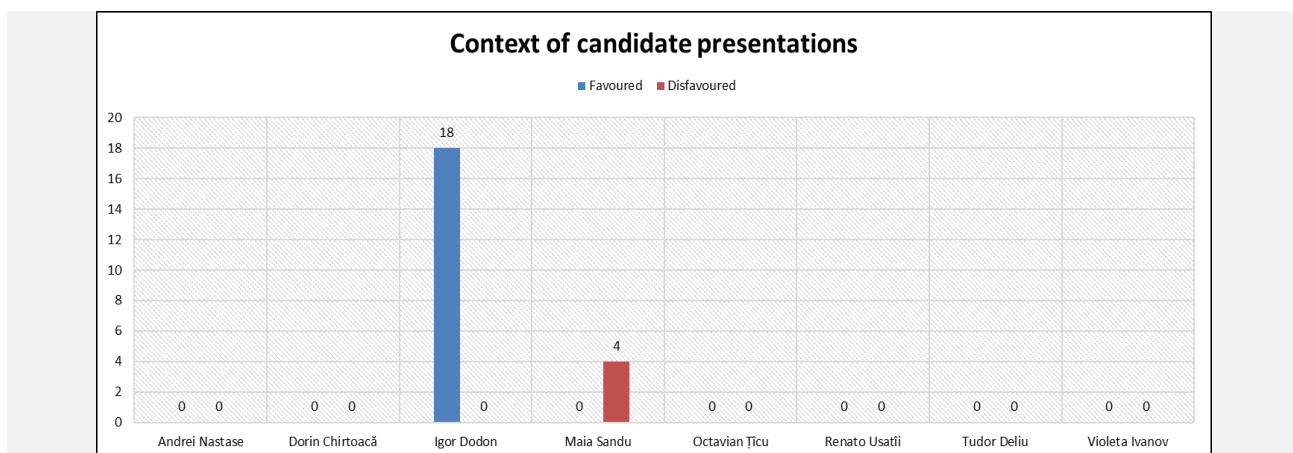
[Realitatea.md](#)

During the reporting period, three candidates – Dorin Chirtoacă, Octavian Țicu and Tudor Deliu – were presented in a neutral manner in the few stories that concerned them. The other male/female candidates were covered both neutrally and positively, or negatively. Hence, Renato Usatîi and Violeta Ivanov each had an appearance that rather favoured them, in the female candidate's case it being an advertising item that was not marked accordingly. Candidate Andrei Năstase was once placed in a rather unfavourable context and Maia Sandu appeared once in both situations. Igor Dodon was also favoured and disadvantaged by the items published on **Realitatea.md**, the disfavour being visibly more obvious (12 such cases versus one favour).



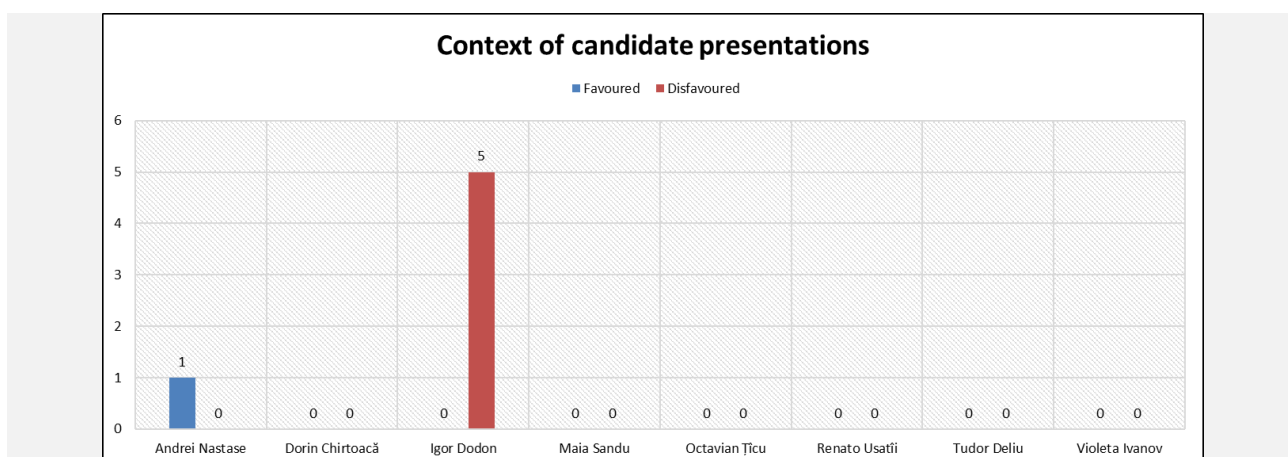
[Sputnik.md](https://sputnik.md)

During the reporting period, the candidates Andrei Năstase, Dorin Chirtoacă, Octavian Țicu, Renato Usatii, Tudor Deliu, and Violeta Ivanov appeared in neutral contexts on **Sputnik.md**, without being favoured or disadvantaged in the items that concerned them. At the same time, Maia Sandu appeared in neutral contexts but was also placed four times in contexts that rather disadvantaged her, and Igor Dodon was the only candidate who, in addition to neutral media coverage, also appeared in positive contexts (18) that favoured him.



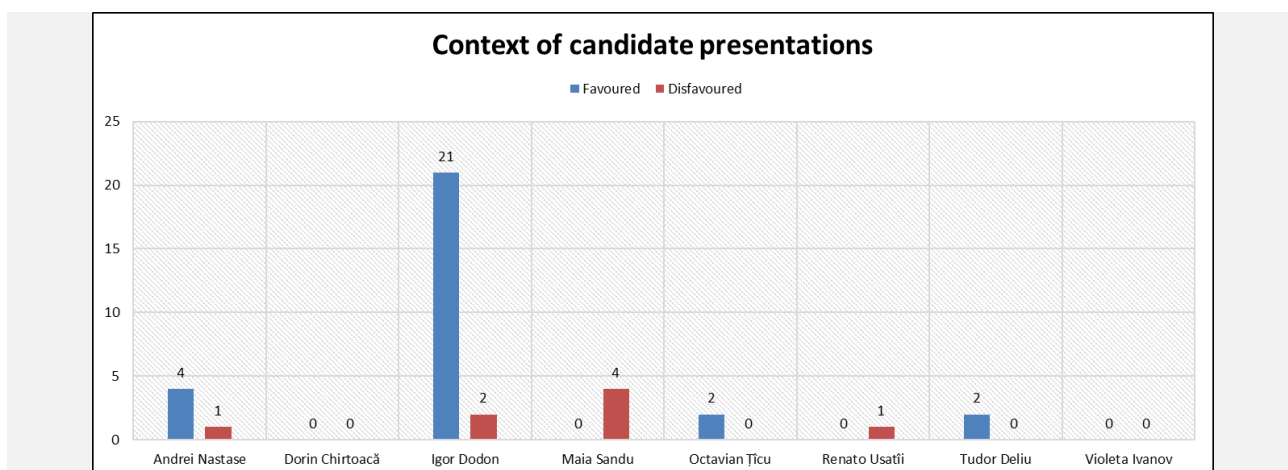
[Timpul.md](https://timpul.md)

Between 18 and 24 October 2020, most candidates, including Dorin Chirtoacă, Maia Sandu, Octavian Țicu, Renato Usatii, Tudor Deliu and Violeta Ivanov enjoyed neutral media coverage on **Timpul.md**. At the same time, Andrei Năstase appeared once in a rather favourable context, and Igor Dodon was most often disadvantaged (5 times out of 7 in which he was the protagonist).

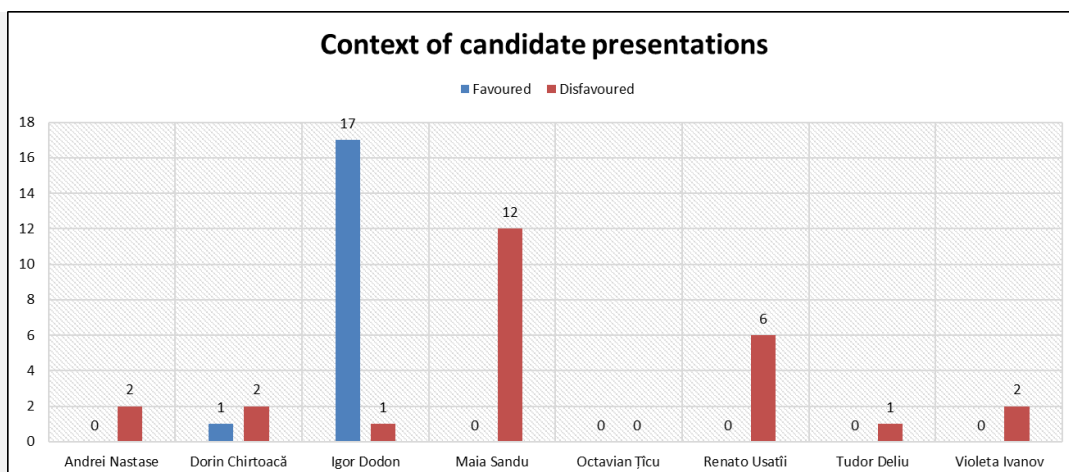


[Unimedia.info](https://unimedia.info)

From 18 to 24 October 2020, the candidates Dorin Chirtoacă and Violeta Ivanov appeared only in neutral contexts in **Unimedia.info** stories. However, in Violeta Ivanov's case, a number of stories that were marked as belonging to the paid category appeared in the general news flow, including under social and/or political headings. In addition, in case of the candidate Andrei Năstase, nearly half of the items that had an obvious advertising character were not marked accordingly. In the same candidate's case, several items that were marked as paid appeared in the political section. At the same time, Năstase was even more disadvantaged in one story. The other male candidates and one female candidate were covered both neutrally and rather positively, or negatively. Igor Dodon thus appeared most often in a context that favoured him directly or indirectly (21 times), being, at the same time, disadvantaged in two cases. Maia Sandu was placed 4 times in a rather unfavourable position, and Renato Usatîi appeared once in such a context. In their turn, Octavian Țicu and Tudor Deliu were rather favoured twice in the items that concerned them on **Unimedia.info**.



During the period monitored, Octavian Țicu was the only candidate who appeared in a neutral context in the few items that concerned him on **Vedomosti.md**. At the same time, the other male candidates and two female candidates were covered both neutrally and positively, as well as negatively. Igor Dodon thus was most often favoured both by the tone of the items and by the frequency of appearances (17 times), appearing only once and in a rather unfavourable context. In addition, Dorin Chirtoacă had a presence in a rather positive context, and two in a disadvantageous one. Similarly, Andrei Năstase, Maia Sandu, Renato Usatîi, Tudor Deliu and Violeta Ivanov were disadvantaged in the items published by **Vedomosti.md**. Most often in such contexts was placed the candidates Renato Usatîi (in 6 cases out of 10 in which he was the protagonist) and Maia Sandu who was placed in a rather unfavourable context in half of the stories that concerned her (12 out of 24). One technique used during this period to disadvantage the candidate Maia Sandu, for example, were the assumptions/suggestions that if she won the elections, Moldova would repeat the negative events from the region (bloody protests, etc.). The candidate's name is used in the same contexts with the refugees from Syria, Donbas, Afghanistan, the Karabakh conflict, etc.



2.3. General conclusions:

- In the period from 18 to 24 October 2020, the twelve online publications monitored covered the campaign for the presidential elections mainly through news.
- **Noi.md** published the highest number of items relevant to the election context, and **Gagauzinfo.md** - the lowest number.
- Most of the items were published in text format but some were also accompanied by video and audio items.
- Most relevant items referred to the political area and to the election process as a whole. Specifically, ten outlets monitored mostly covered the political aspects of the election campaign, and two – the ones of the general election process.
- All six male candidates and the two female candidates for the supreme position in the state appeared as protagonists of the election stories, in various proportions.
- The independent candidate supported by PSRM Igor Dodon appeared most often as the protagonist, and the PUN candidate Octavian Țicu appeared the least as such. Igor

Dodon thus appeared almost 5 times more often as an item protagonist than Octavian Țicu.

- The five male candidates and the two female candidates for the supreme position in the state appeared as sources in the election items, in different proportions.
- The independent candidate supported by PSRM Igor Dodon appeared most often as a source, and PLDM candidate Tudor Deliu – the least often. Igor Dodon was quoted in media reports over 34 times more often than Tudor Deliu.
- The items published by all twelve media outlets monitored were further strongly disproportionate in terms of gender, in favour of men.
- Candidate Igor Dodon had the highest media visibility in the twelve publications.
- Candidate Igor Dodon was most often placed in positive contexts that favoured him.
- Candidate Maia Sandu was most often placed in negative contexts that disadvantaged her.

[Full report in Romanian](#)