

Online Media Monitoring in the Election Campaign for 2020 Presidential Elections

Report no. 6
1 – 7 November 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 Rossia 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

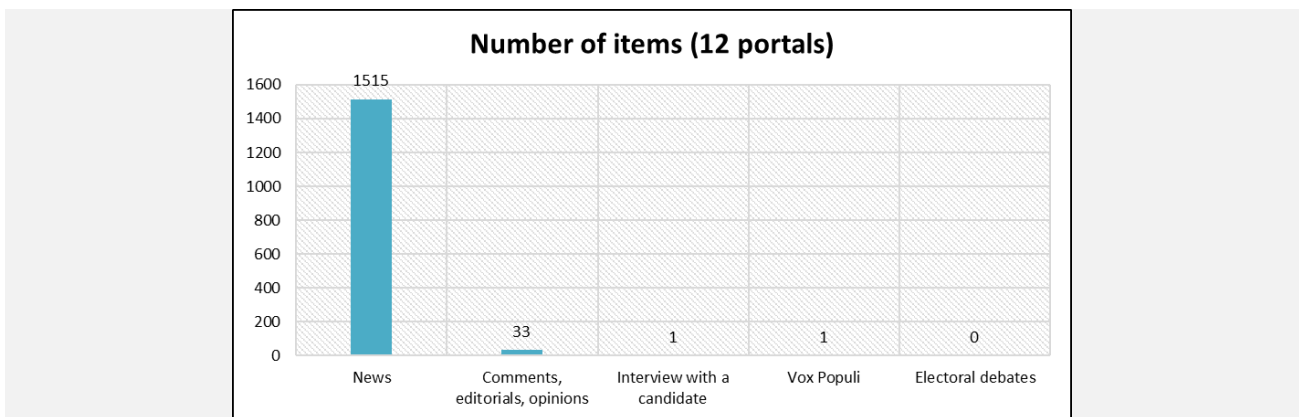
The monitoring is based on the methodology developed by Oxford Media Research Centre for the monitoring projects of the international organization Article 19: Global Campaign for Free Expression. The same methodology was used for monitoring media outlets in the election period and campaign for the 2016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

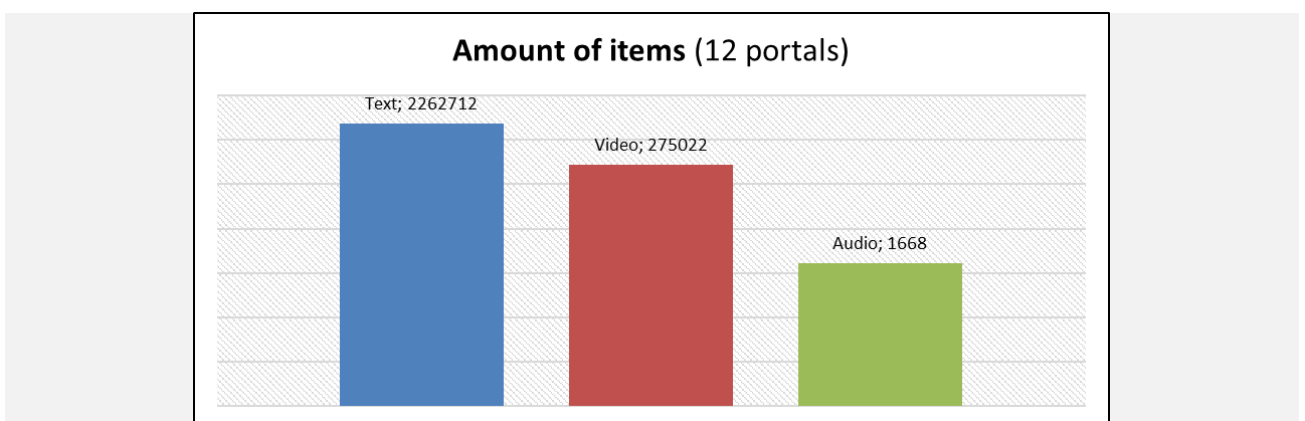
2.1 General trends

Between 1 and 7 November 2020, the twelve online media outlets monitored cumulatively published 1550 items that directly or indirectly targeted the campaign for presidential elections. Most media reports were news stories (1515 or nearly 98%) that referred to the male/female candidates for the position of president, the day of the first round of elections, the political entities represented by the candidates, the CEC work, the voting in the country and in the diaspora, the voting by the citizens on the left bank of Nistru River, electoral actions, etc. Other 33 items, or a little over 2% of the total, were published in the form of comments, editorials, or other opinion stories, one item was published as an interview with a male/female candidate and one was a Vox Populi poll.

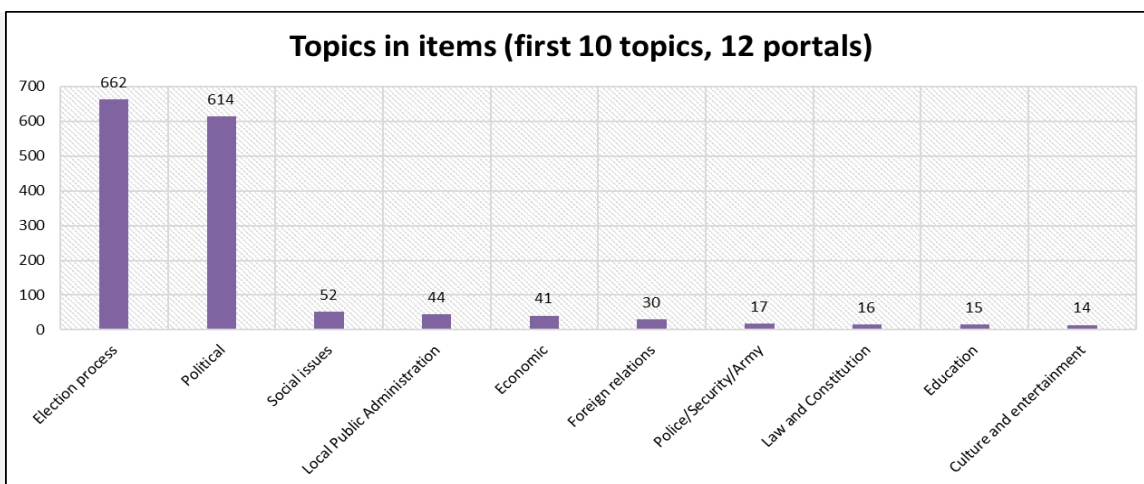


The publication **Noi.md** further led the ranking with the largest number of media products with political and election character (273) while **Timpul.md** was the one to have the lowest number in this period – 40 items. The other 10 outlets quantitatively covered the election campaign and election day as follows: **Agora.md** – in 166 stories; **Unimedia.info** – in 156; **Sputnik.md** – in 143; **Aif.md** – in 142; **Newsmaker.md** – in 137; **Realitatea.md** – in 135; **Actualitati.md** – in 121; **Kp.md** – in 110; **Vedomosti.md** – in 78; and **Gagauzinfo.md** – in 49 relevant stories. At the same time, **Noi.md** published the largest news stories with an election character (270); **Vedomosti.md** – the most comments (18); **Kp.md** published an interview with a candidate; and **Gagauzinfo.md** – a Vox Populi poll.

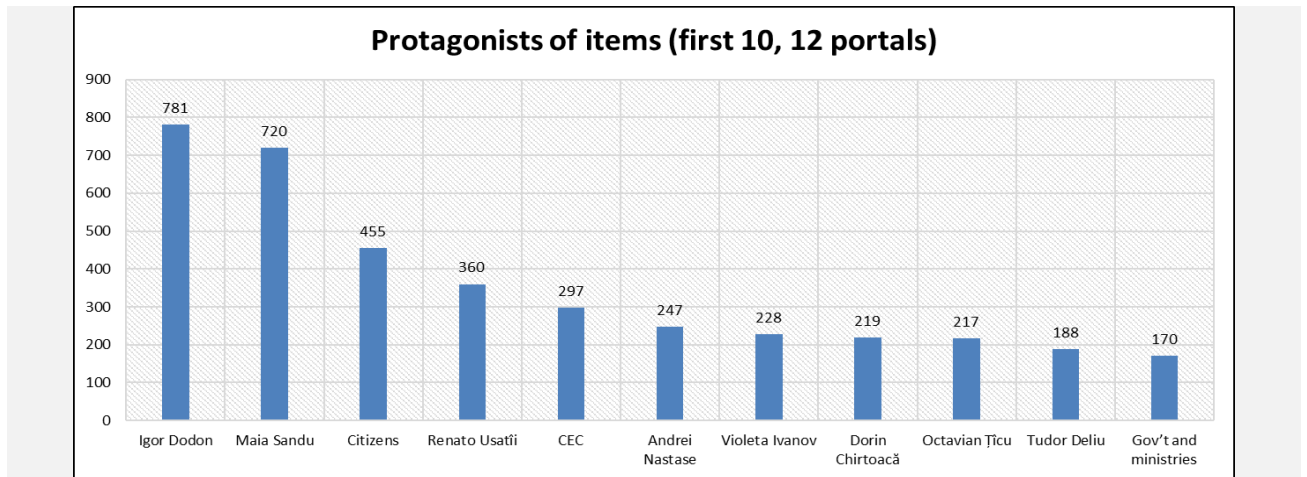
Most of the items (1536) were published in text format; in 288 cases, the texts were accompanied by videos and in 6 – by audios. The volume of the items monitored was thus quantified in characters (text) and seconds (video and audio), as follows:



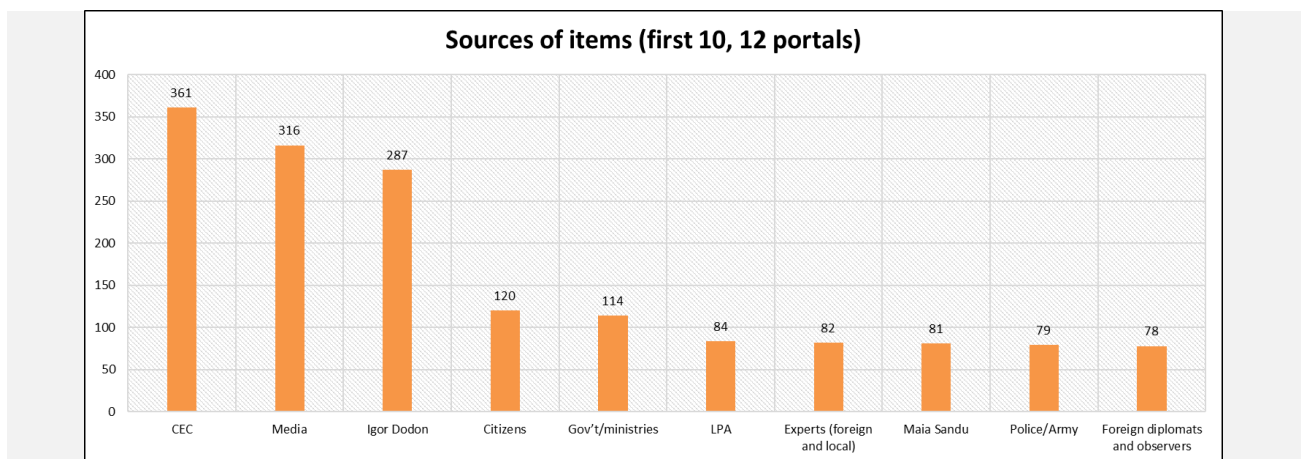
The election process and the political area dominated in the ranking of the topics tackled in the reference period, a period that also included the day of the first round of the presidential elections. Hence, 662 items (or almost 43%) referred to the election process, and especially to the election day, unfolding of the voting, CEC statements, infringements, the voting in the country and in the diaspora, the voting of the citizens on the left bank of the Nistru River etc. At a distance of 48 items were the journalistic products with political themes, this being covered in 614 stories (or almost 40% of the total). The two thematic areas were followed by others at great distances, including: social issues, the activities of local public administration, economy, foreign relations, and education or culture in an election context.



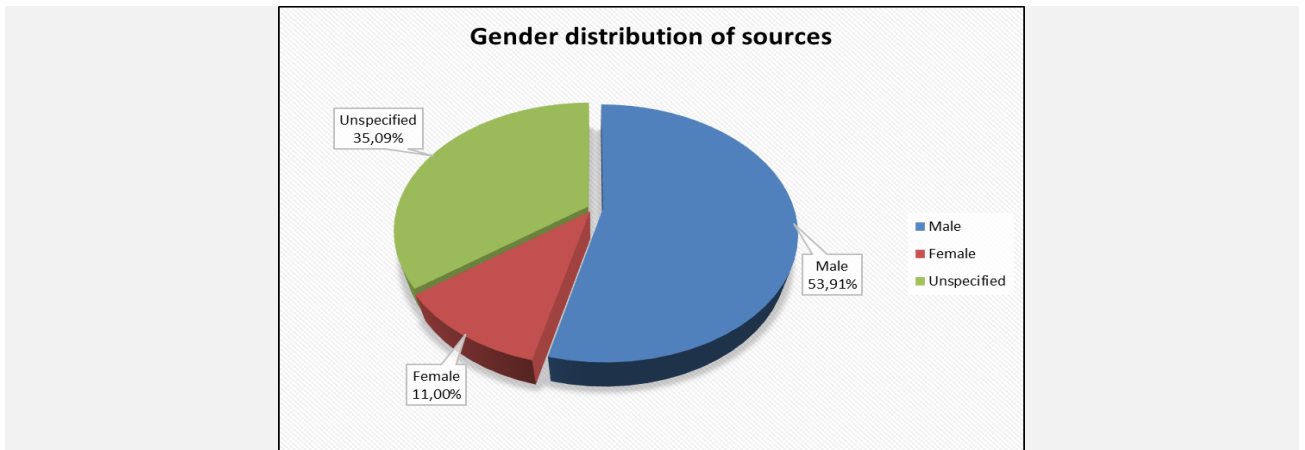
The six male candidates and the two female candidates registered in the race for the presidential elections appeared as protagonists in different proportions in media reports in the reference period. Specifically, the independent candidate supported by the Socialist Party (PSRM) Igor Dodon, as in previous periods, was most often targeted in media products with an election character (781 cases), being the first among the 41 categories of protagonists covered in general. The candidate of the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) Maia Sandu positioned herself at a relatively short distance, with 720 appearances as the protagonist of the stories. Male/female citizens ranked third, with 455 such appearances, followed by the candidate of the Political Party "Our Party" (PN) Renato Usatii, who was the protagonist 360 times. The male/female representatives of the Central Election Commission (CEC) were visible during this period 297 times, especially on the day of the first round of the presidential elections. They were followed by the other male candidates and one female candidate for the position of president as follows: the candidate of the Party "Platform of Justice and Truth" (PPDA) Andrei Nastase - 247 times; the candidate of the "Șor" Party Violeta Ivanov - 228 times; the candidate of the Liberal Party (PL) Dorin Chirtoaca - 219 times; that of the "Party of National Unity" (PUN) Octavian Țîcu - 217 times; and that of the Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova (PLDM) Tudor Deliu - 188 times. Igor Dodon thus appeared over four times more often as the protagonist of stories than Tudor Deliu.



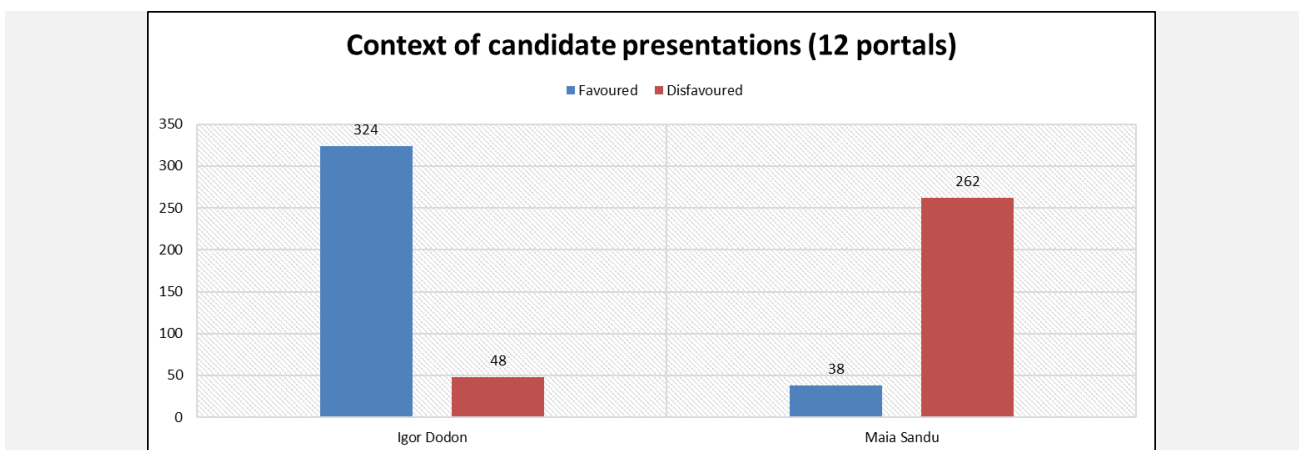
During this period, the twelve online publications quoted a total of 2,046 sources. This time, most often as sources of information served CEC representatives, quoted 361 times as well as other media sources, quoted by the male/female colleagues 316 times. The top was completed in this sense by the candidate Igor Dodon, with 287 cases in which he appeared as a source of information for the media reports with a direct or indirect election character. The male/female citizens stood out in the same context, being quoted 120 times, and so did the male/female representatives of the Government, with 114 appearances; the male/female representatives of the local public administration, with 84 quotes, or the male/female experts, with 82 cases when they were sources of information. More rarely appeared as sources the other male candidates and the two female candidates for the position of president, and namely: Maia Sandu – 81 times; Renato Usatii – 46 times; Andrei Năstase – 36 times; Dorin Chirtoacă – 22 times; Octavian Țicu – 18 times; Violeta Ivanov – 11 times; and Tudor Deliu – 9 times. Igor Dodon was thus quoted almost 32 times more often than Tudor Deliu.



The distribution of sources by gender showed an imbalance in favour of men. Hence, 1103, or almost 54% of the sources quoted in the media reports, published between 1 and 7 November 2020 by the twelve online media outlets, were men. Other 225 sources, or 11%, were women, and in 718 cases (over 35%) the gender of the sources was not specified.



The male candidate and the female candidate who have access to the second round of the presidential elections were covered in both neutral and positive, but also negative contexts by the twelve media outlets monitored. Specifically, Igor Dodon had more appearances in a positive context, which favoured him (324 cases). He appeared 48 times in rather unfavourable situations. On the other hand, Maia Sandu, as a whole, had an opposite type of treatment by the media, the number of negative contexts in which she was placed being much higher than those that rather favoured her (262 to 38 cases).



In conclusion, following the monitoring of the editorial behaviour of the twelve online media outlets between 1 and 7 November 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 accentuated elements of bias and tendentiousness. The three publications favoured and clearly promoted the independent candidate supported by PSRM Igor Dodon, and disadvantaged the PAS candidate Maia Sandu. A real campaign of discredit, assault, denigration through false information, insinuations, sexist titles and formulations, expressions that incited to hatred, violence and discrimination was carried out by the three publications in relation to Maia Sandu.
- **Noi.md, Vedomosti.md and Sputnik.md** further favoured Igor Dodon through the tone of coverage and the presentation of the candidate in a positive context; **Sputnik.md** covered the male and female candidates for the position of president in the most balanced manner in terms of quantity. Maia Sandu was disfavoured by the three publications.

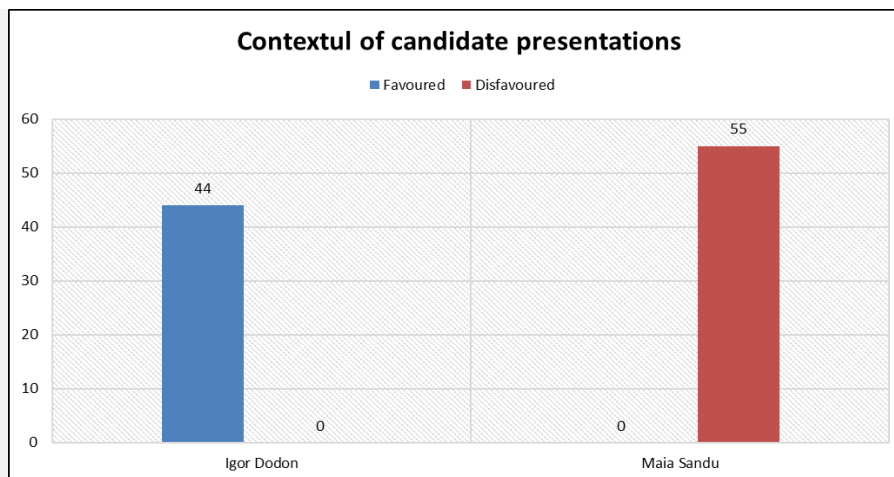
- **Gagauzinfo.md** paid attention especially to the election day, the number of stories decreasing considerably on the other days of the period monitored. The publication ensured the best gender balance of the sources quoted in the election stories.
- **Unimedia.info** covered the election process and the day of the first round of elections, presenting all the male candidates and the two female candidates. A larger space was granted to Igor Dodon who appeared several times in a positive context that favoured him.
- **Agora.md** and **Newsmaker.md** had a relatively balanced editorial policy, the stories being generally unbiased, and the male and female candidates for the position of president were presented most of the time in a neutral context, but also in positive or negative ones; however, without a clear tendency to favour or disfavour them.
- **Realitatea.md** covered the election campaign and the election day, presenting all male candidates and the two female candidates for the position of president. Candidate Igor Dodon appeared most of the time in a disfavoured context.
- **Timpul.md** paid the least attention to electoral topics during the period monitored, covering especially the election day. Igor Dodon was placed more often in unfavourable contexts, and Maia Sandu - more often in favourable contexts.

2.2 Editorial behaviour of the publications



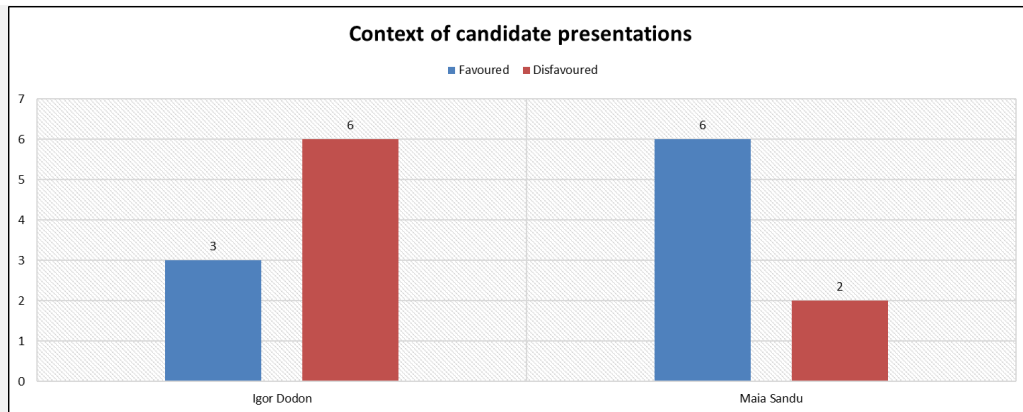
Actualitati.md

As in all previous monitoring periods, most stories on political and/or electoral issues published by **Actualitati.md** had a single source of information and a strong and obvious bias in favour of the candidate Igor Dodon. He was covered 44 times in positive contexts that favoured him, the other 13 appearances as a protagonist being neutral. Candidate Maia Sandu, on the other hand, was presented in negative, unfavourable and derogatory contexts in all cases when she was the protagonist, as well as in some that targeted her indirectly. Candidate Maia Sandu during this period was the target of an extensive campaign of denigration through false information and assaults, including elements of hate speech, with serious infringement not only of the ethical norms in journalism, but also of several laws, including the one that provides for equal opportunities, or the one on non-discrimination. The publication **Actualitati.md** did not prove any of the statements made by Igor Dodon or other male/female protagonists, and never offered Maia Sandu the right to reply.



Agora.md

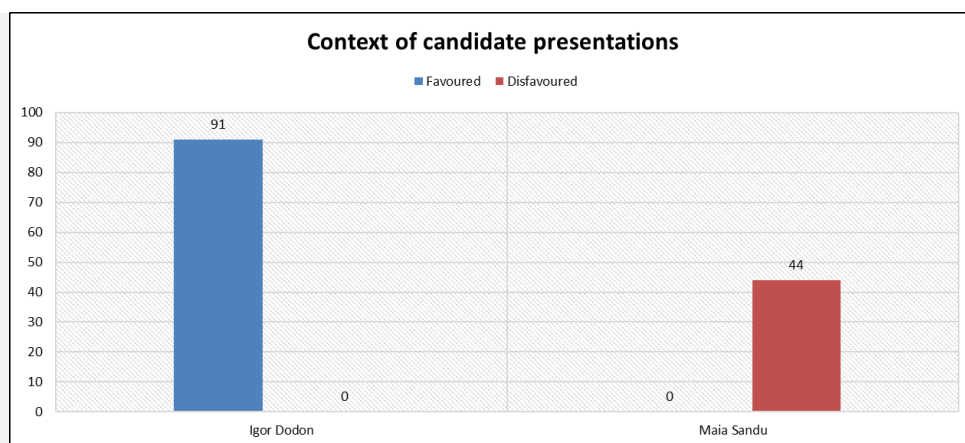
Agora.md covered the election campaign, including the election day, in a relatively balanced and equidistant manner, without interpretations of facts or statements. In most cases, the texts were unbiased in relation to the sources and the male/female protagonists, presenting them in a neutral manner. If initially those concerned by the stories did not want to comment, and later changed their minds and commented, the publication offered them space, explaining the context in which the information appeared. Candidate Igor Dodon and candidate Maia Sandu generally enjoyed a neutral editorial treatment from **Agora.md**. In some cases (3 Igor Dodon and 6 Maia Sandu) the contexts favoured the candidate, and in a few others (6 Igor Dodon and 2 Maia Sandu) the contexts were rather unfavourable for the candidate. Nevertheless, an obvious, sustained and continuous tendency to favour or disfavour Igor Dodon or Maia Sandu was not established.



**АРГУМЕНТЫ
И ФАКТЫ** В МОЛДОВЕ

Aif.md

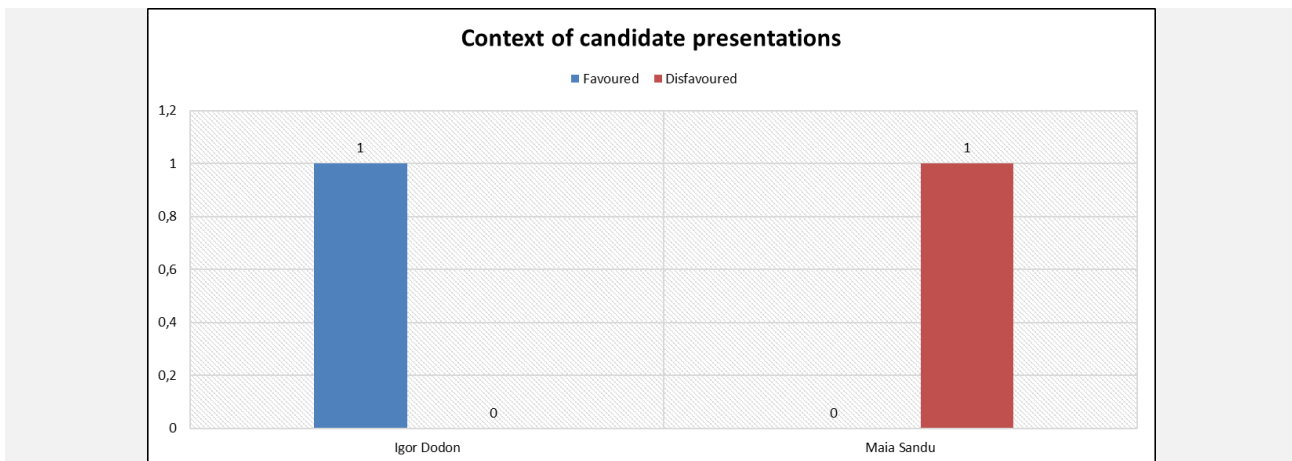
Between 1 to 7 November 2020, **Aif.md** continued to openly and substantially promote the candidate Igor Dodon, publishing a large number of stories that targeted him directly or indirectly, including all statements, opinions, assaults, exhortations, etc. Igor Dodon was thus favoured 91 times in this publication's stories, including in all the items in which he was the protagonist (76) as well as in other 15 cases when he was favoured indirectly. Maia Sandu, on the other hand, was placed in a negative context that substantially disfavoured her and obviously 44 times out of 50 in which she was the protagonist. The **Aif.md** publication made personal attacks, unproven and unfounded allegations, fakes and denigrations against the candidate Maia Sandu, without presenting her opinion at least once.



Gagauzinfo.MD

Gagauzinfo.md

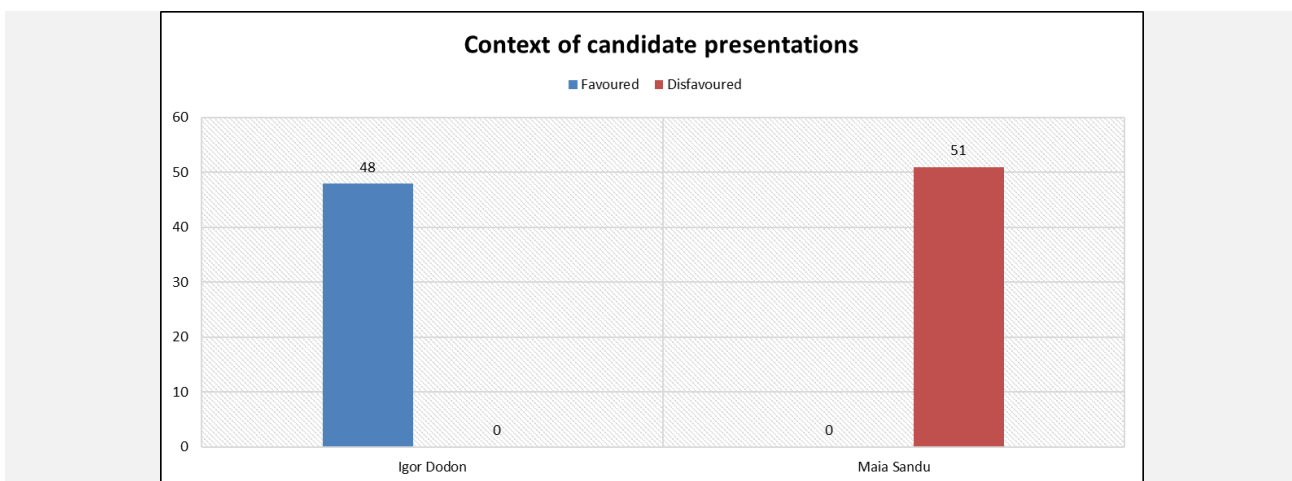
The regional publication **Gagauzinfo.md** paid relatively little attention to the election campaign for the presidential elections and, yet, more than in previous monitoring periods. The regional publication **Gagauzinfo.md** in the reference period covered predominantly neutrally the electoral actions of the male and female candidate who have access to the second round of the presidential elections. The context was once rather favourable for Igor Dodon and once rather unfavourable for Maia Sandu, without a clear promotion (positive or negative) of either found.



МОЛДОВА ▾

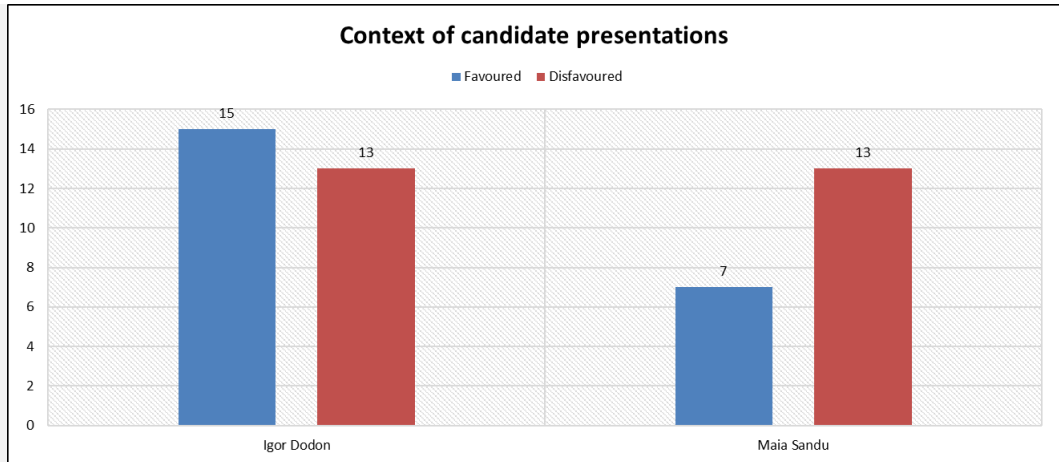
Kp.md

The publication **Kp.md** continued to openly and substantially favour Igor Dodon, both in the news and in the opinions of various authors, including foreign experts, MPs etc. Igor Dodon thus appeared in neutral and positive contexts, being favoured in 48 cases out of 62 in which he was the protagonist of the stories. Maia Sandu, on the other hand, was subjected to a continuous campaign of criticism, denigration, assault, and discrimination on the grounds of gender and allegation, without being granted the right of reply. The candidate Maia Sandu was thus disadvantaged in 51 cases out of 70 in which she was the protagonist, being placed in eminently negative, accusatory and offensive contexts.

**NewsMaker**Newsmaker.md

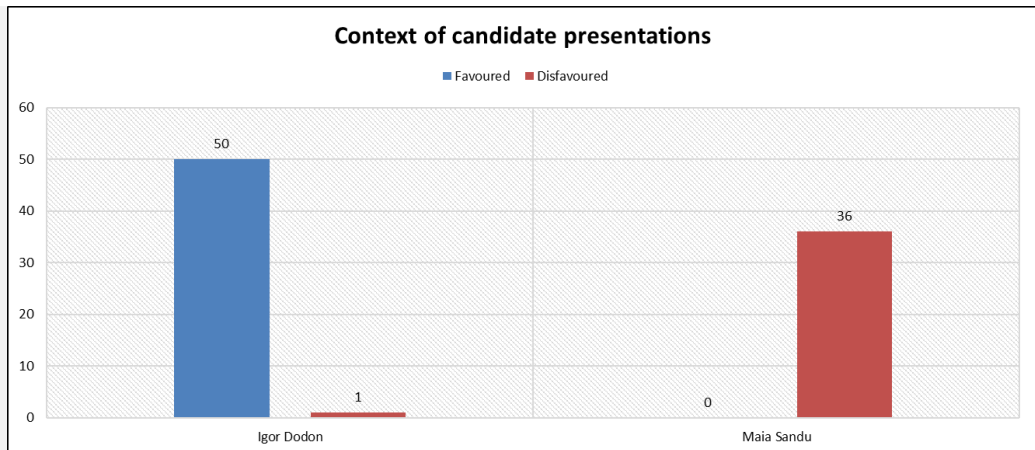
Between 1 and 7 November 2020, **Newsmaker.md** generally covered in a balanced way the male candidate and the female candidate for the position of President of the Republic of Moldova who have remained in the race, presenting him/her most often in neutral contexts. Nevertheless, both

Igor Dodon and Maia Sandu were placed in certain cases in either rather favourable contexts (15 times Igor Dodon and 7 times Maia Sandu) or unfavourable ones (13 times each), those being indirect favouring or disfavouring of the candidate. Hence, no bias by the **Newsmaker.md** in relation to Igor Dodon or Maia Sandu was found.



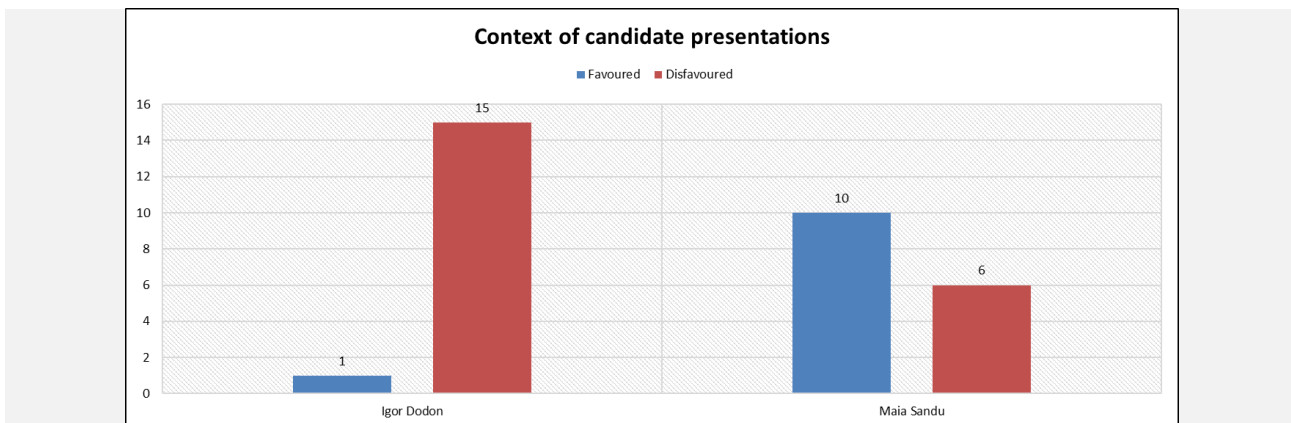
Noi.md

From 1 to 7 November 2020, **Noi.md** continuously favoured the candidate Igor Dodon, both in its news and comments. The candidate supported by PSRM was placed in a positive context 50 times, and in neutral ones in most of the items in which he was the protagonist. One item indirectly disadvantaged him, by mentioning the candidate's name in a rather negative context. Maia Sandu, on the other hand, had both a neutral and a strongly negative treatment, being obviously disadvantaged in 36 cases. The disfavouring took place both through the news texts, which included several serious statements and allegations without proof, or without presenting the candidate's opinion, and, in some cases, through fake photos.



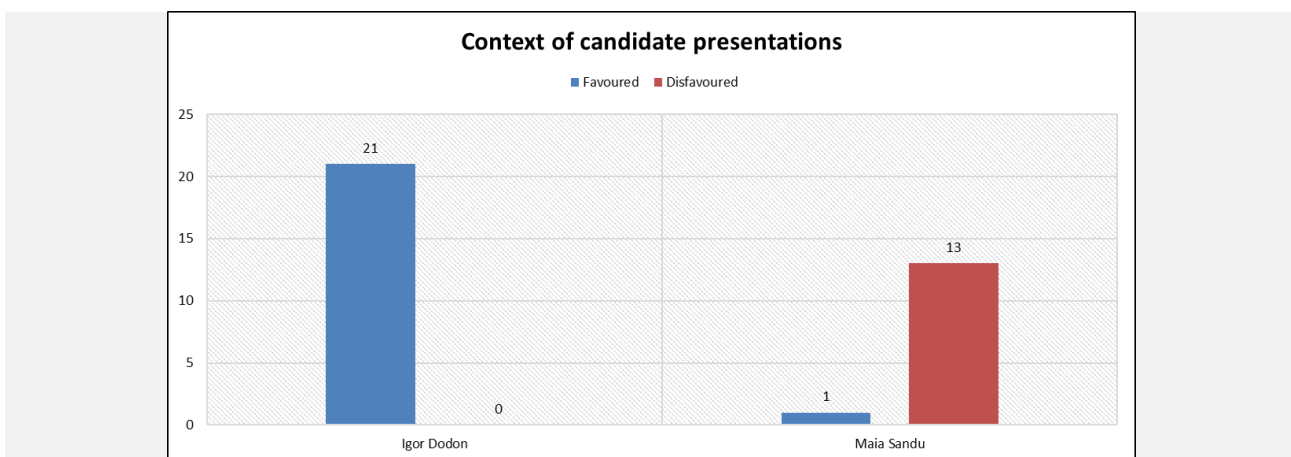
Realitatea.md

During the period covered by this report, the male and female candidate who have access to the second round of the presidential elections were covered by **Realitatea.md** mainly in a neutral manner. However, candidate Igor Dodon was rather indirectly disadvantaged in 15 cases and favoured in one case, and candidate Maia Sandu was placed in contexts that favoured her (over ten times) as well as that disadvantaged her (6 times).



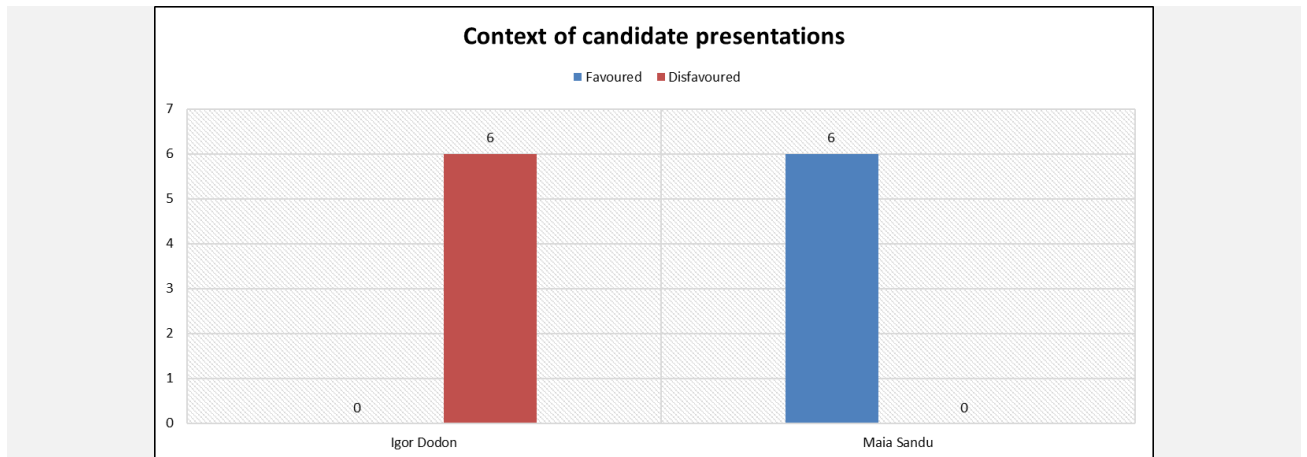
[Sputnik.md](https://sputnik.md)

Between 1 and 7 November 2020, the candidates Igor Dodon and Maia Sandu in general were covered in a neutral way by the publication **Sputnik.md**. However, Igor Dodon was placed in a rather positive context in 21 cases and Maia Sandu in a rather negative one 13 times.



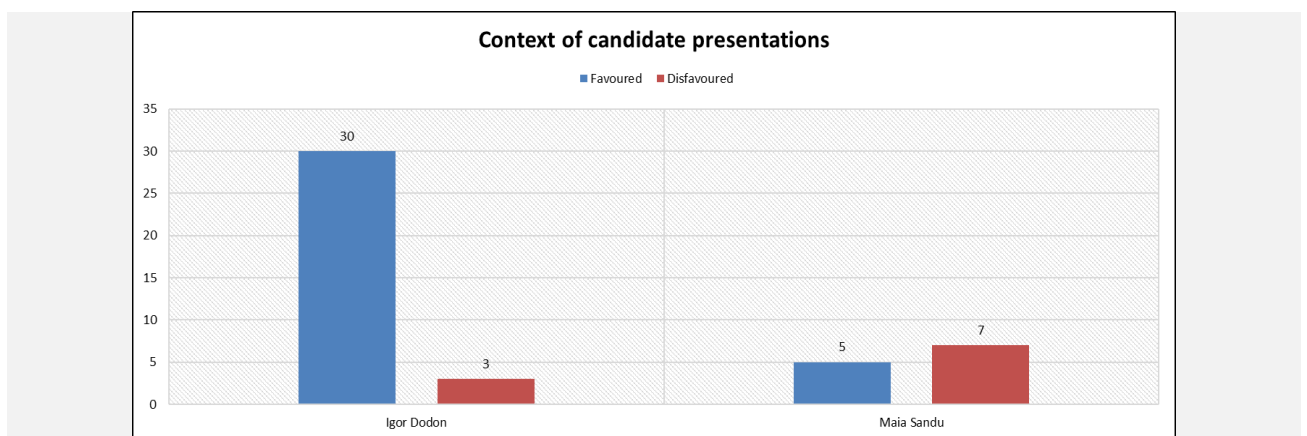
[Timpul.md](https://timpul.md)

During the period concerned, the male and female candidates with access to the second round of the presidential elections were generally covered neutrally by **Timpul.md**. However, there were found six cases of favouring Maia Sandu and of disavouring Igor Dodon through the rather positive and negative contexts in which he/she was placed.



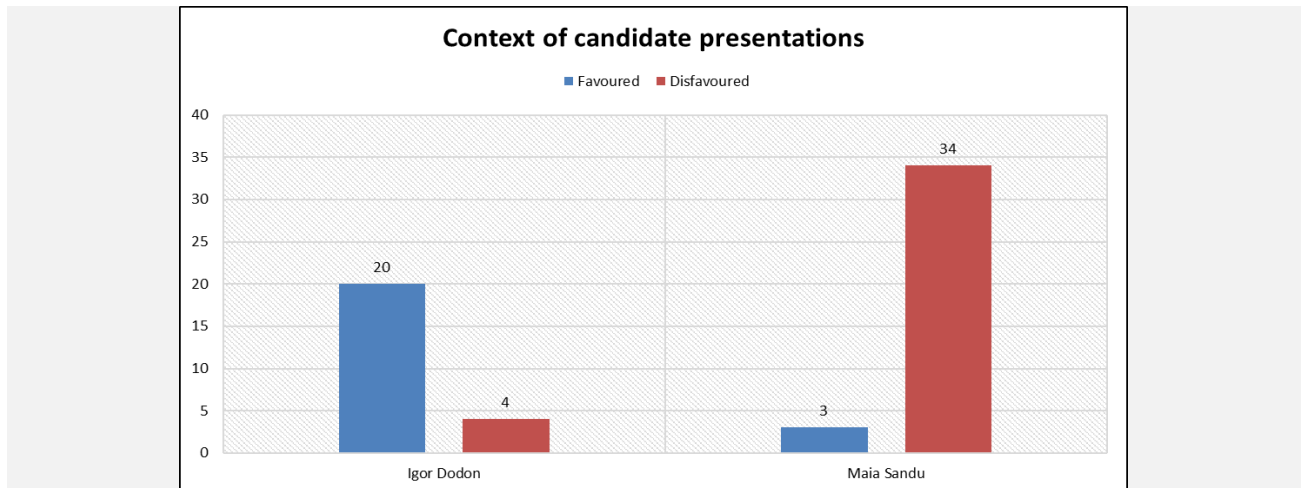
Unimedia.info

From 1 to 7 November 2020, the candidate Igor Dodon, in addition to neutral media coverage, enjoyed 30 placements in contexts that favoured him (out of 57 cases in which he was the protagonist). At the same time, this candidate was also disfavoured 3 times by the context. In her turn, the candidate Maia Sandu, besides neutral contexts, was placed 5 times in rather favourable ones, and 7 times in some rather unfavourable ones.



Vedomosti.md

During the reference period, the candidate Igor Dodon appeared several times in a neutral context in **Vedomosti.md** stories, but for the most part being favoured openly and directly both quantitatively (in 20 out of 31 cases in which he was the protagonist) and by text formulations. He was also indirectly rather disadvantaged by the statements of third parties in 4 cases. On the other hand, the candidate Maia Sandu was substantially disadvantaged (in 34 cases out of 44 in which she was the protagonist), 3 times indirectly benefiting from a rather positive context.



2.3. General conclusions:

- In the period from 1 to 7 November 2020, the twelve online publications monitored covered the campaign for the presidential elections mainly through news but also, more rarely, through comments, Vox Populi polls, and one interview.
- **Noi.md** published the highest number of items relevant to the election context, and **Timpul.md** – the lowest number.
- Most relevant items referred to the election process and to the political area. Seven outlets out of 12 mainly approached the election process, and 5 gave preference to the political area.
- All six male candidates and the two female candidates for the supreme position in the state appeared as protagonists of election stories.
- The stories published by all twelve media outlets monitored were strongly disproportionate in terms of gender, in favour of men.
- Igor Dodon was most often placed in positive contexts that favoured him.
- Maia Sandu was most often placed in negative contexts that disadvantaged her.

[Full report in Romanian](#)