

Online Media Monitoring in the Election Campaign for 2020 Presidential Elections

Report no. 2
1 – 10 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 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

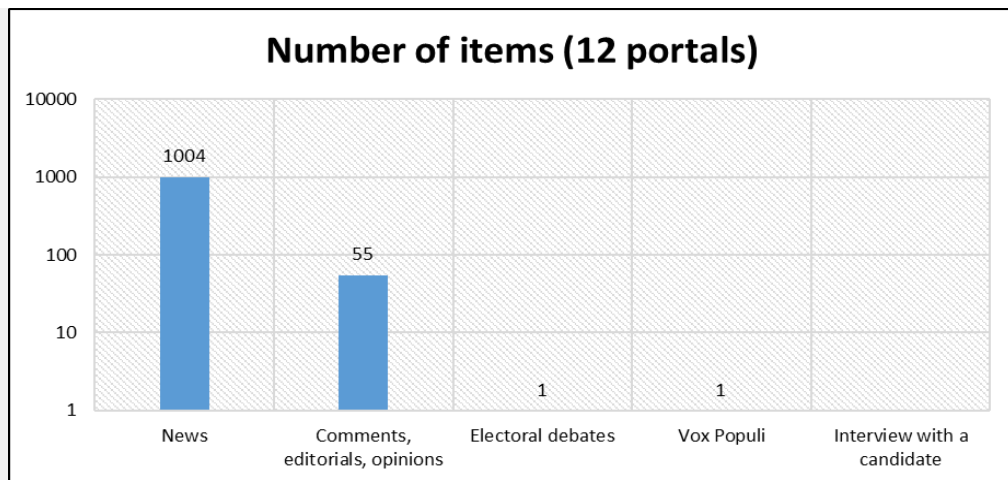
The monitoring is based on the methodology developed by Oxford Media Research Centre for the monitoring projects of the international organization Article 19: Global Campaign for Free Expression. The same methodology was used for monitoring media outlets in the election period and campaign for the 2016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

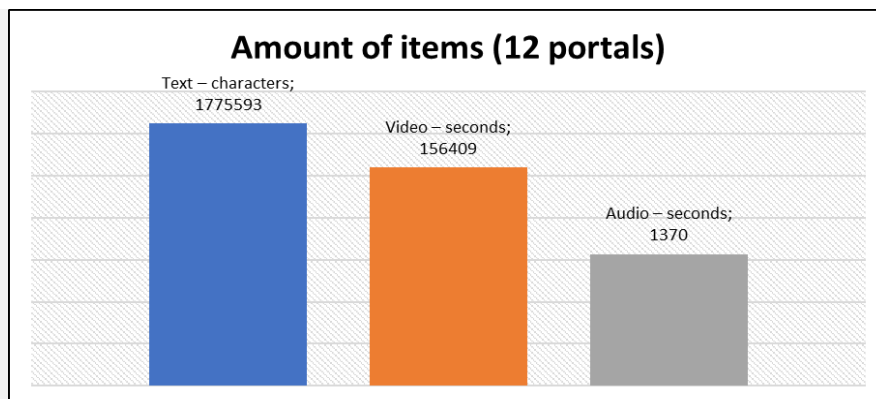
2.1 General trends

Between 1 and 10 October 2020, the 12 web portals monitored published a total of 1061 stories that directly or indirectly targeted the election period/campaign. Over 94% of them (1004 texts) were news stories with different degrees of complexity that concerned the male/female candidates for the position of president, the political entities they represented, the work of the CEC, etc. Other 55 items, or 5.2% of the total number, were written in the form of comments, editorials or other opinion articles. At the same time, an electoral debate could be watched during the reference period on a monitored website (Realitatea.md) as well as a Vox Populi poll was published in the same period by Kp.md.

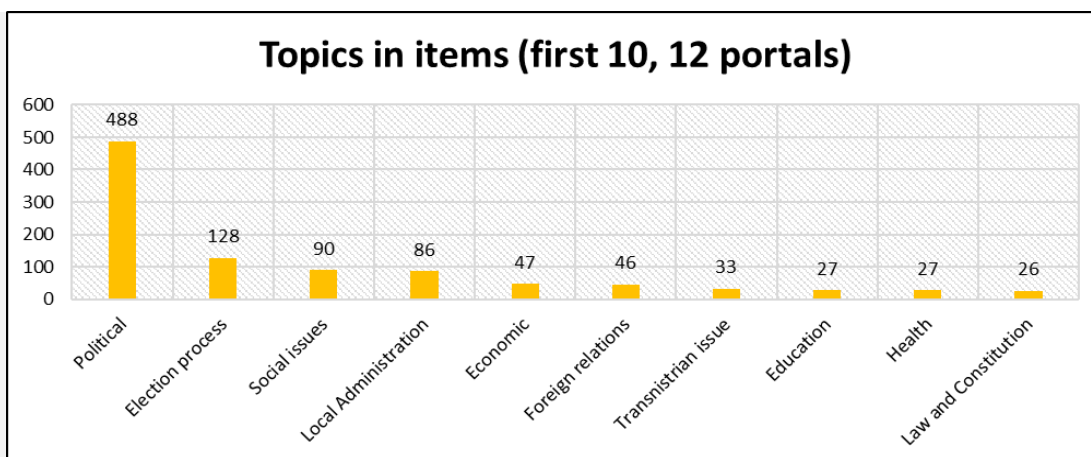


As in the previous reporting period, **Noi.md** published the largest number of texts with a political and electoral character (230), and **Gagauzinfo.md** - the smallest (10). At the same time, **Aif.md** had 149 relevant items, **Agora.md** - 103, **Actualitati.md** - 101, **Unimedia.info** - 85, **Kp.md** - 83, **Realitatea.md** - 80, **Sputnik.md** - 72, **Vedomosti.md** - 64, **Newsmaker.md** - 62, and **Timpul.md** - 22 items.

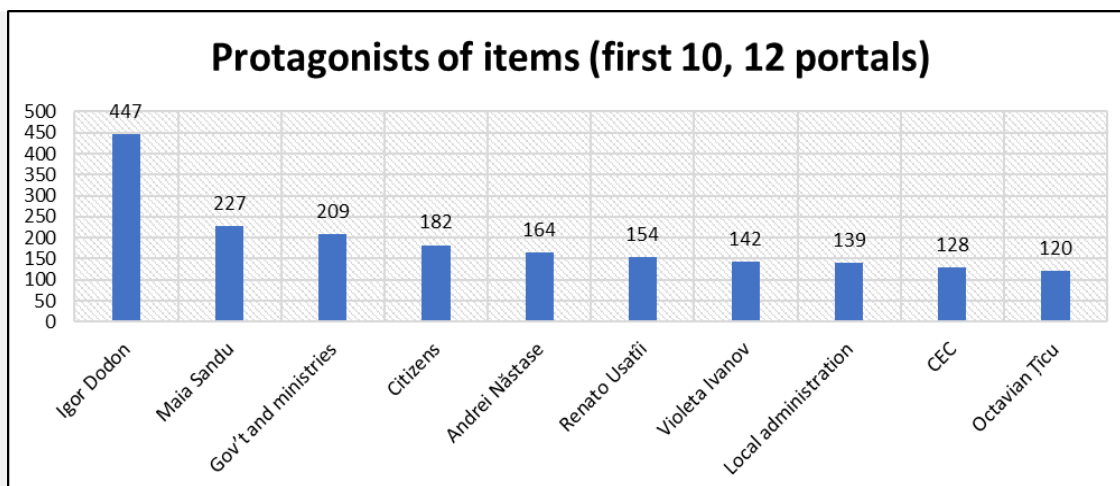
Text was the basis of the format of most items. In some cases, it was accompanied by video images (116 items) or audio (5), or the multimedia elements were placed without text. The volume of the items monitored was thus quantified in characters (text) and seconds (video and audio), as follows:



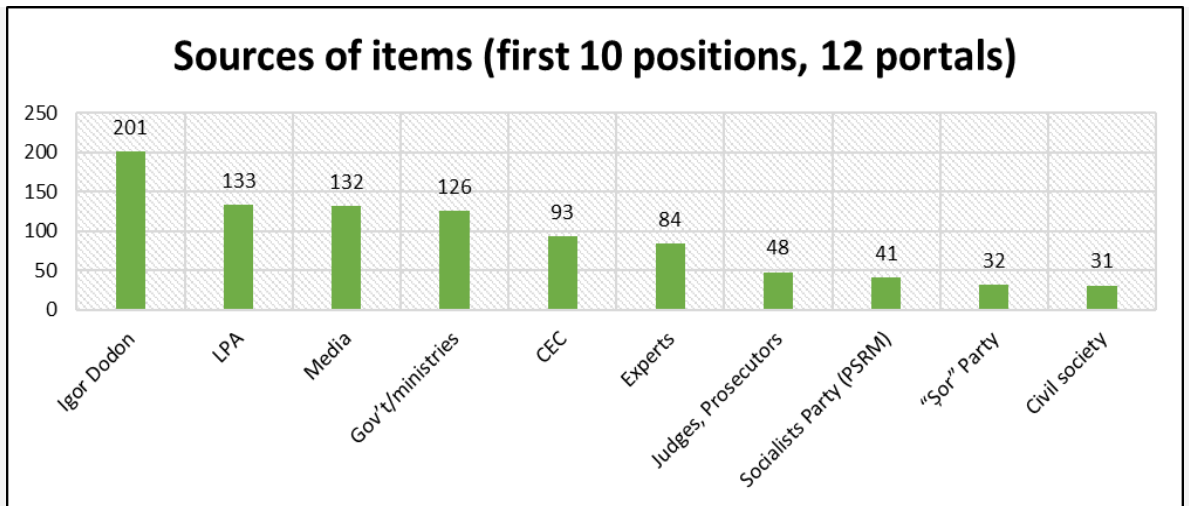
Most often, the published texts referred to the behaviour and statements of some male/female candidates, the allegations launched against them by their male/female opponents or other persons, the replies of the accused, but also to the election process in general. Social issues were also among the top issues addressed in electoral context during this period. Another important part of the items concerned, including in an eminently positive context, the work of the local public administration bodies, especially of the Chişinău City Hall and General Mayor. Economic topics, with reference to foreign relations, the Transnistrian issue, education, health, or from the legal area, human rights, etc. appeared less frequently in the texts relevant for this monitoring,



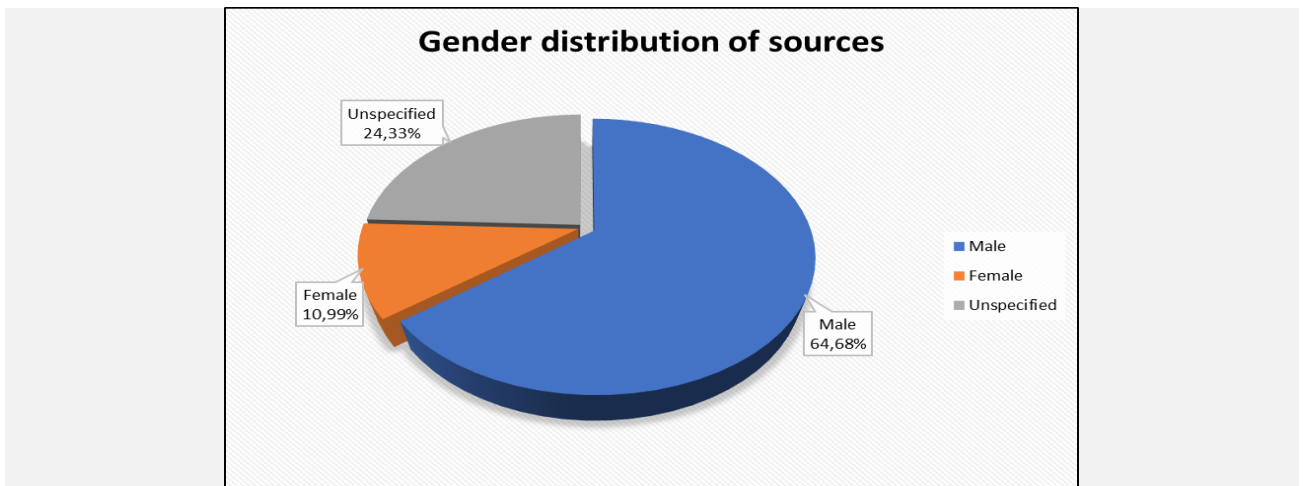
In addition, during the reference period, all the 6 male candidates and the 2 female candidates, registered in the presidential elections, appeared in the media reports as protagonists. The protagonist thus most frequently reported in media items with an electoral character was the independent candidate supported by the Socialists Party (PSRM) Igor Dodon (447 cases). The candidate of the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) Maia Sandu appeared as protagonist half as often (227 cases), followed by government officials (209 cases), citizens (182 cases), and the candidate of the "Platform for Justice and Truth" Political Party (PPDA) Andrei Năstase (164 cases). Fewer times as protagonists appeared the candidate of the Political Party "Our Party" (PN), Renato Usatii (154 times), the candidate of the Political Party "Şor" Violeta Ivanov (142 times), male and female representatives of the local public administration (139 times), of the Central Election Commission (CEC), (128 times) or the candidate of the Political Party "National Unity Party" (PUN), Octavian Țicu (120 times). The candidate of the Liberal Party (PL) Dorin Chirtoacă was the protagonist 107 times, and that of the Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova (PLDM) Tudor Deliu - 104 times.



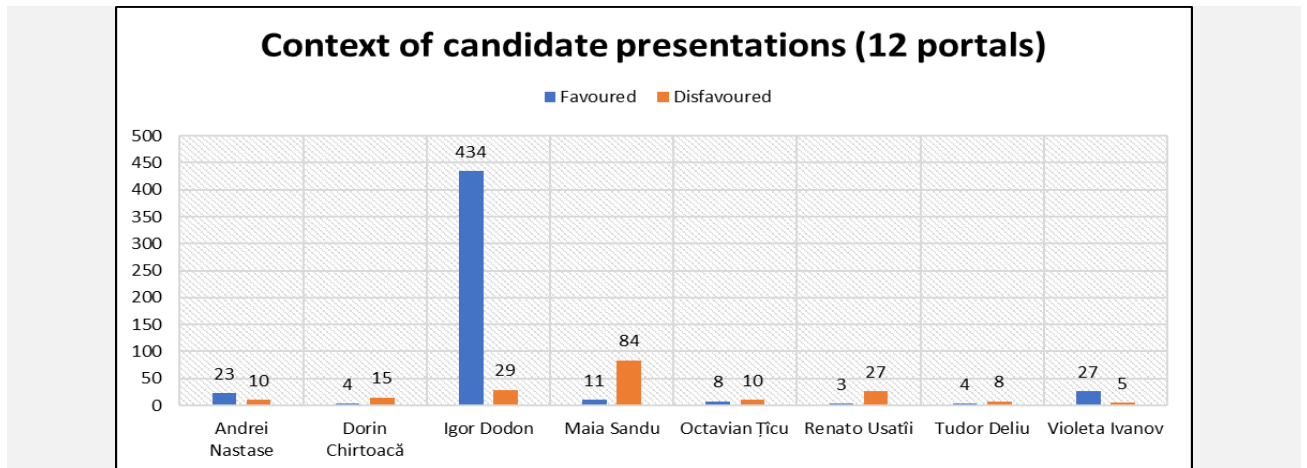
The 12 electronic publications together quoted 1275 sources, with the candidate Igor Dodon being on the first position in this case as well, with 201 cases in which he appeared in this capacity. The representatives of the local public administration, media sources other than those that published the items as well as the male and female representatives of the Government were sources in a similar number of cases (133, 132 and 126 accordingly). The members of the CEC and other male and female election officials (in 93 cases) or foreign/local male/female experts were less frequently quoted (in 84 cases). All the candidates registered in the presidential race appeared as sources in the reference period, in different ratios (Igor Dodon being quoted the most and Tudor Deliu the least).



In this context, the media items were further gender unbalanced, with almost 65% of the sources quoted being men and almost 11% women, with more than 24% unspecified.



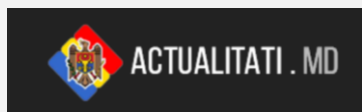
Cumulatively, the candidate Igor Dodon had the highest visibility in the online media monitored, also being presented mainly in a positive context (434 favourable appearances in the 12 media sources). Renato Usatii, on the other hand, appeared the least in contexts that favoured him (3 cases). On the other hand, the candidate Maia Sandu appeared most often in negative contexts that disadvantaged her (84 times), and the candidate Violeta Ivanov was disadvantaged by the least number of items (5).



In conclusion, following the monitoring of the editorial behaviour of the 12 online media outlets between 1 and 10 October 2020, the following trends can be established:

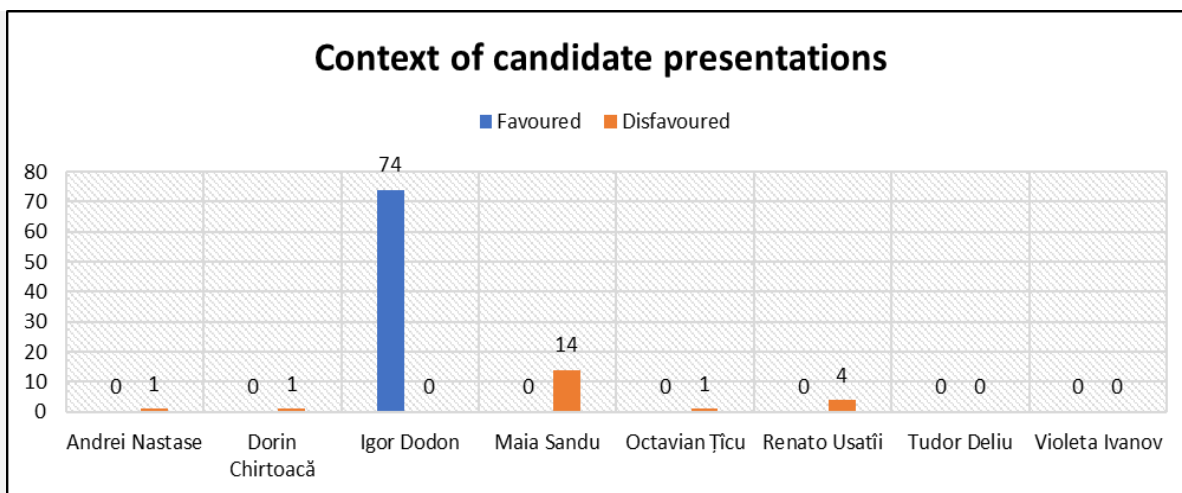
- **Actualitati.md, Aif.md and Kp.md** had further similar editorial behaviours, with strong elements of bias, lack of equidistance, journalistic correctness, and violation of ethical rules. The publications openly favoured and massively promoted the independent candidate supported by PSRM Igor Dodon. The other male/female candidates appeared quantitatively unbalanced in the stories of the three publications, and were, in most cases disadvantaged, even discredited, by frequent use of personal qualifications and personal attacks, and without being offered the right of reply.
- **Noi.md, Sputnik.md and Vedomosti.md** mainly favoured Igor Dodon through the tone of coverage and presentation in positive contexts. At the same time, the PAS candidate Maia Sandu was obviously disadvantaged, including through the opinions published but also through the photographs that accompanied certain texts.
- **Unimedia.info** covered the election process and the activities of the male/female candidates, most often placing in favourable contexts Igor Dodon and Andrei Năstase (PPDA), but also the candidate Violeta Ivanov ("Șor" Party), who was also promoted in items of obvious advertising character, not marked accordingly.
- **Agora.md and Newsmaker.md** had a relatively balanced editorial policy, the authors of the items being, in general, impartial in relation to the sources and protagonists while the male/female candidates for the position of president were often presented in neutral contexts but also in positive or negative ones and, yet, without a tendency to favour or disfavour them.
- **Realitatea.md** covered all the candidates for the position of president, both neutrally and positively or negatively. The candidate Violeta Ivanov was promoted in stories of an obvious advertising character that were not properly marked.
- The items published by **Timpul.md** presented the candidates both in neutral and in positive and negative context. The most disadvantaged was Igor Dodon.

2.2 Editorial behaviour of the publications



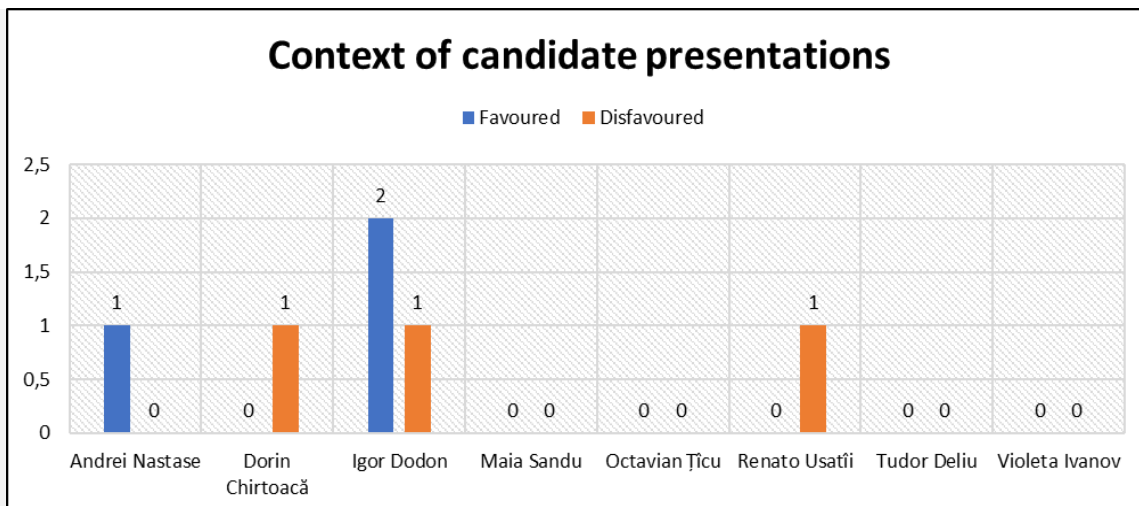
Actualitati.md

Most of the items on political and/or electoral topics published by **Actualitati.md** had a single source of information and a biased character, favouring the candidate Igor Dodon through the tonality of the texts. He was presented only in favourable light, with details on his initiatives in all important areas, emphasizing his qualities of leader, entrepreneur, good negotiator, good friend with Vladimir Putin, etc. In total, between 1 and 10 October 2020, Igor Dodon was favoured, directly or indirectly, in 74 items published on Actualitati.md, being the only candidate who benefited from such an attitude in the media stories concerned. Other 4 candidates (Andrei Năstase, Dorin Chirtoacă, Octavian Țîcu, Renato Usatii) appeared in negative contexts in the few materials in which they were directly or indirectly targeted while the candidate Maia Sandu was disadvantaged in 14 of 17 cases in which she was targeted, both through the texts, including opinions, and accompanying images. A technique frequently used by Actualitati.md to put the candidate in negative light was through the opinions or statements made of third parties about them, without giving the right of reply to the latter.



Agora.md

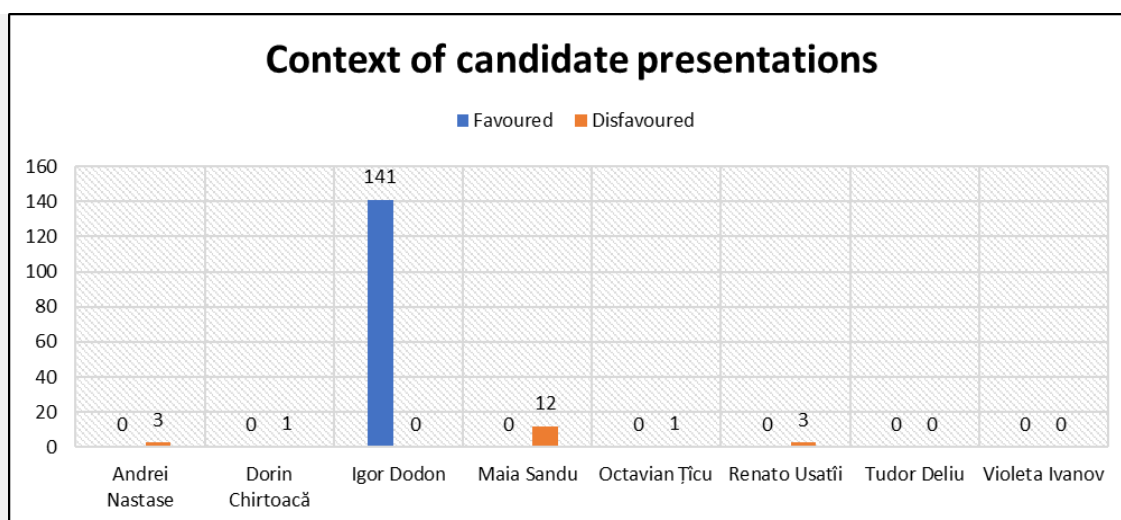
In general, the editorial policy of the online publication **Agora.md** in the reporting period was balanced, the items with an electoral character being impartial as a whole in relation to the sources and the male/female protagonists. Four out of eight candidates for the position of president of the Republic of Moldova were presented in a neutral manner in the media stories. The candidate Andrei Năstase appears once in a rather favourable context, due to the lack of a second source, and Igor Dodon appears twice in a context that indirectly benefits him as well as once in a rather negative context. Dorin Chirtoacă and Renato Usatii, in their turn, appear once in contexts that do not favour them. At the same time, many news stories in the publication are based on a single source.



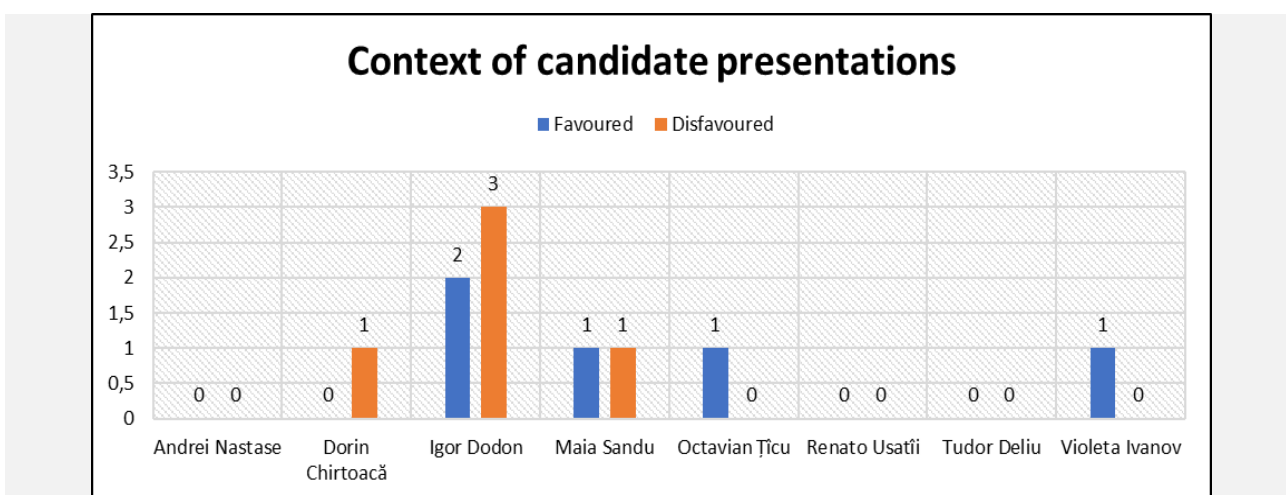
**АРГУМЕНТЫ
И ФАКТЫ** В МОЛДОВЕ

Aif.md

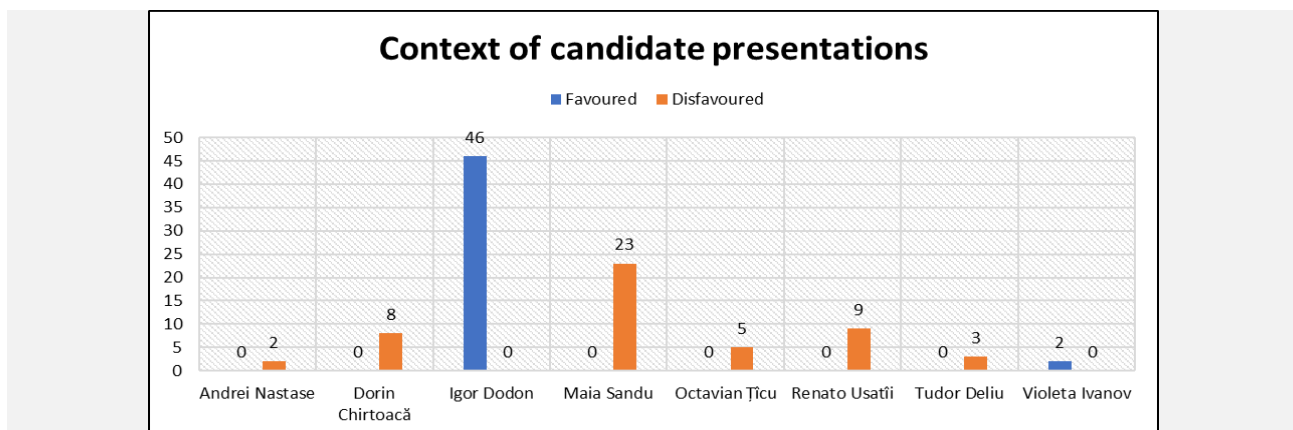
During the reference period, **Aif.md** further openly promoted Igor Dodon, both by rendering word-for-word his statements, posts, actions, and indirectly, by presenting, for example, the work of the capital's General Mayor Ion Ceban exclusively in a positive light. In total, Igor Dodon was favoured 141 times in the publication's stories and is the only candidate who appeared in a positive context in the Aif.md items. Tudor Deliu and Violeta Ivanov appeared in a neutral context, and Andrei Năstase, Dorin Chirtoacă, Maia Sandu, Octavian Țicu and Renato Usatii, when appearing in stories, were presented only in negative contexts. Most often in such context was concerned the PAS candidate Maia Sandu, her name being uttered directly or indirectly especially in opinions, without ever being offered the right to reply.



The appearances of the candidates Andrei Năstase, Renato Usatii and Tudor Deliu in the items published by **Gagauzinfo.md** were neutral. Octavian Țicu and Violeta Ivanov appeared once in contexts that rather favoured them, and Dorin Chirtoacă had an unfavourable appearance. Maia Sandu and Igor Dodon were placed in both positive and rather negative contexts.



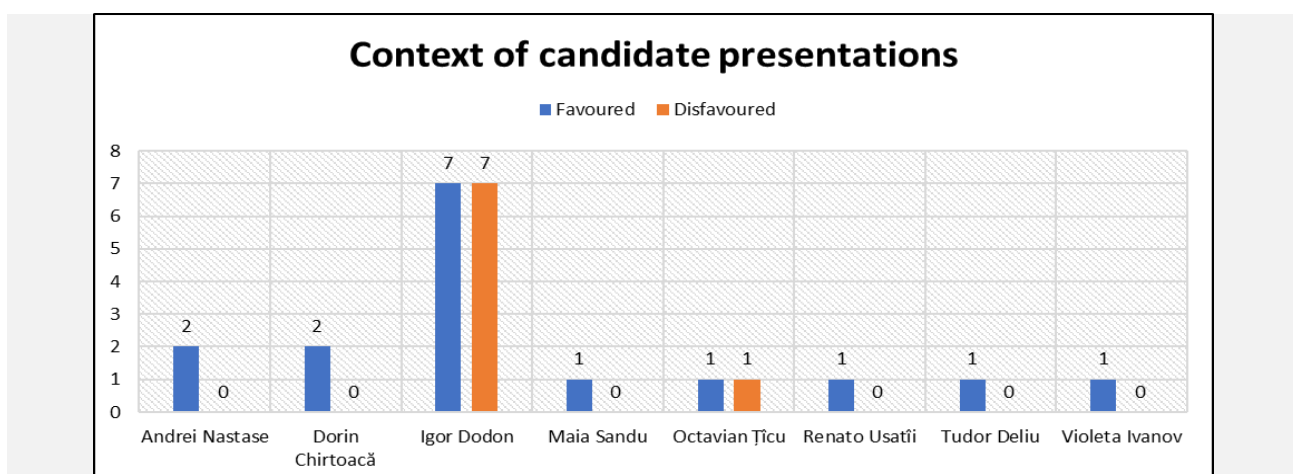
During the reporting period, **Kp.md** further massively favoured Igor Dodon, strongly disfavoured other male/female candidates, both in its news and comments of various authors, without ensuring the right of reply to those assaulted, criticized, ironized and/or slandered. The candidate Igor Dodon was thus presented exclusively in positive contexts (46 cases), Violeta Ivanov also appearing twice in positive contexts. The other male/female candidates were disadvantaged by being presented each time in negative contexts, by unproven allegations without the right to reply, malicious comments, value judgments and personal attacks, violating ethics rules in journalism. Maia Sandu was targeted most often in such context (23 times). In addition, a large number of news items were published based on the comments of journalists or analysts. Kp.md often published texts similar to those on **Actualitati.md** or **Aif.md**, included comments signed by the same authors.



NewsMaker

[Newsmaker.md](https://www.newsmaker.md)

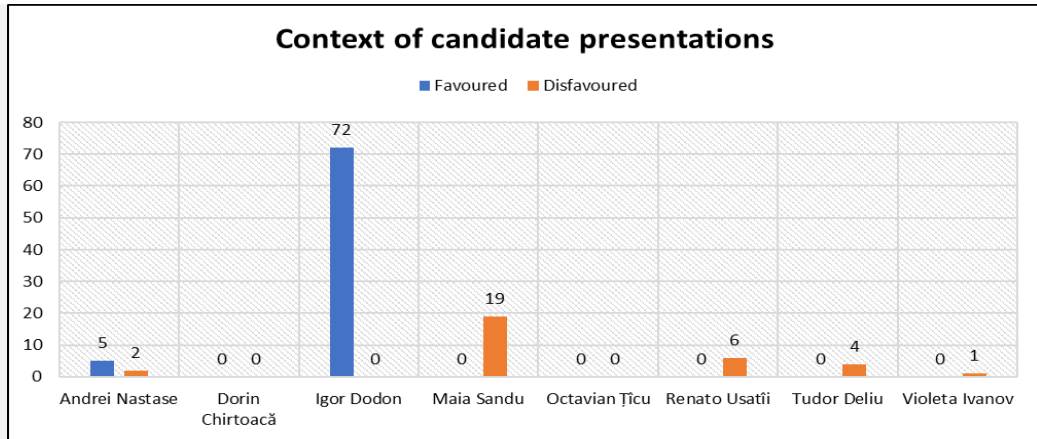
Between 1 and 10 October 2020, **Newsmaker.md** publication had a relatively balanced editorial behaviour, presenting the candidates especially in the context of their launch in the election campaign, covering them in a neutral manner. Although without an obvious tendency to favour or disfavour any of the male/female candidates, each of them appeared in contexts that either favoured or disadvantaged them (e.g. someone's allegations against a candidate disfavoured them if they failed to express their opinion on the subject; also, a male/female candidate was favoured if in the presentation of their election program, they speak about good and very good initiatives, accusing one of the male/female opponents of incompetence, without the replies of those targeted being also presented).



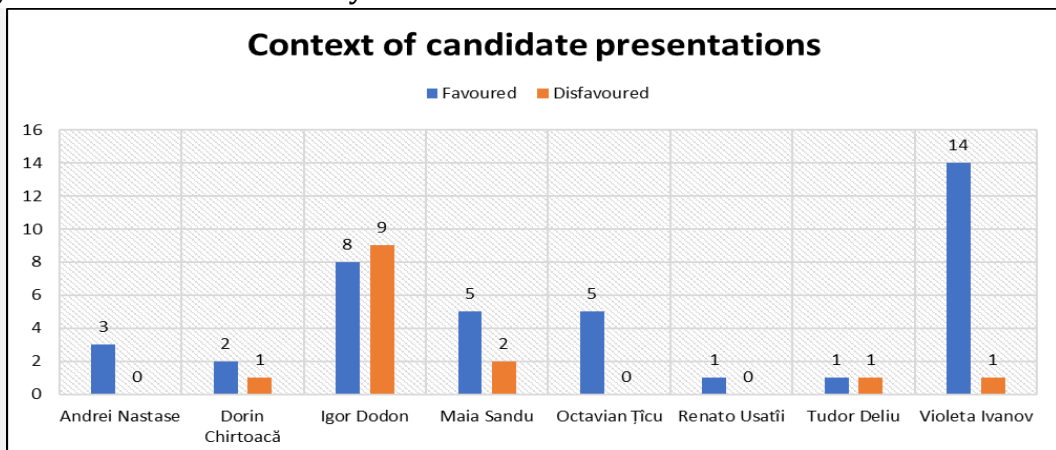
[Noi.md](https://www.noim.md)

In the period from 1 to 10 October 2020, the online publication **Noi.md** massively favoured the candidate Igor Dodon, who was placed only in positive contexts 72 times, being the only candidate who appeared only in favourable positions. Two other candidates - Dorin Chirtoacă and Octavian Țicu - appeared in neutral contexts during the reporting period, and Violeta Ivanov, Tudor Deliu, Renato Usatâi and Maia Sandu were disadvantaged. Maia Sandu was

presented most often in negative contexts and with an obvious intention to disadvantage her (19 times), both in the news texts, in the photos, and in the opinions. The candidate Andrei Năstase was also covered during this period both in contexts that favoured him (5 times) and in two that disadvantaged him. The publication’s editorial policy was thus biased, some of its news items were tendentious, often from a single source of information, and the allegations against some candidates and potential candidates were not balanced with the opinion/position of the person concerned. Last but not least, the publication resorted to image manipulation techniques, publishing infographics, for example, with the six male candidates and the two female candidates for the position of president apparently in the order of registration in the ballot paper but by pushing the candidate Igor Dodon out in front.



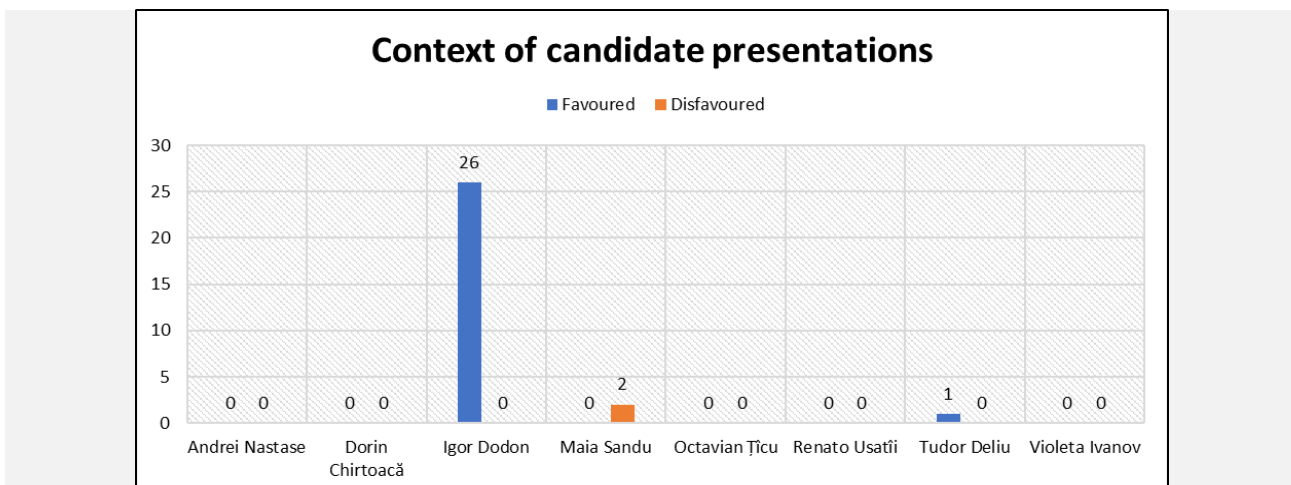
During the reporting period, the six male candidates and the two female candidates appeared in different contexts that either favoured or disadvantaged them. The candidates Andrei Năstase, Octavian Țicu and Renato Usatii were thus rather favoured through the context of the news, especially when it came to certain statements concerning other actors, without the opinion of the latter being present. Similarly, the candidates Dorin Chirtoacă, Igor Dodon and Tudor Deliu as well as the candidates Maia Sandu and Violeta Ivanov appeared both in contexts that favoured them and vice versa. Igor Dodon, however, many times appeared in contexts that disadvantaged him, and Maia Sandu, Dorin Chirtoacă and Violeta Ivanov – in favourable contexts. In the case of Violeta Ivanov, **Realitatea.md** published a number of detailed promotional stories with an obvious advertising character which, however, were not properly marked but which clearly favoured her.





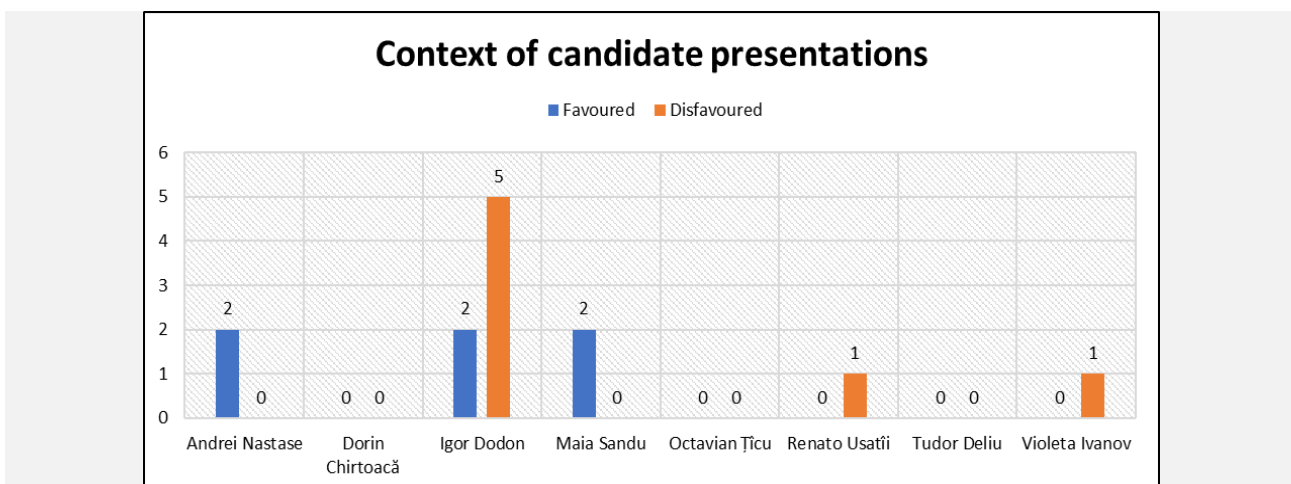
Sputnik.md

In the report period, the candidates Andrei Năstase, Dorin Chirtoacă, Octavian Țicu, Renato Usatii as well as the candidate Violeta Ivanov appeared in neutral contexts on **Sputnik.md**, without being favoured or disadvantaged. Tudor Deliu appeared once in a context that rather favoured him, and Maia Sandu – twice in a disadvantageous context. Igor Dodon, in his turn, was the candidate with the most appearances in only positive contexts (26), which favoured him.

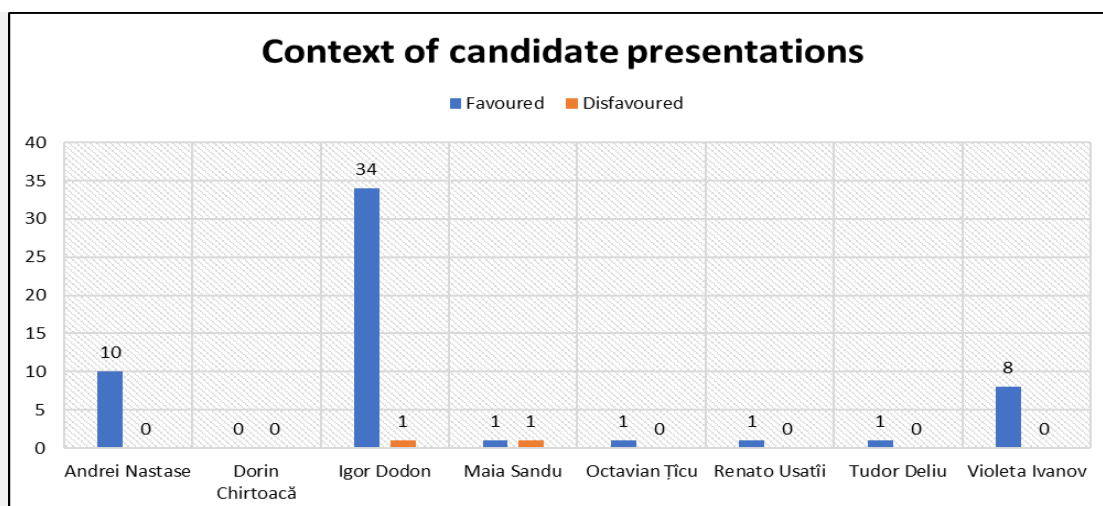


Timpul.md

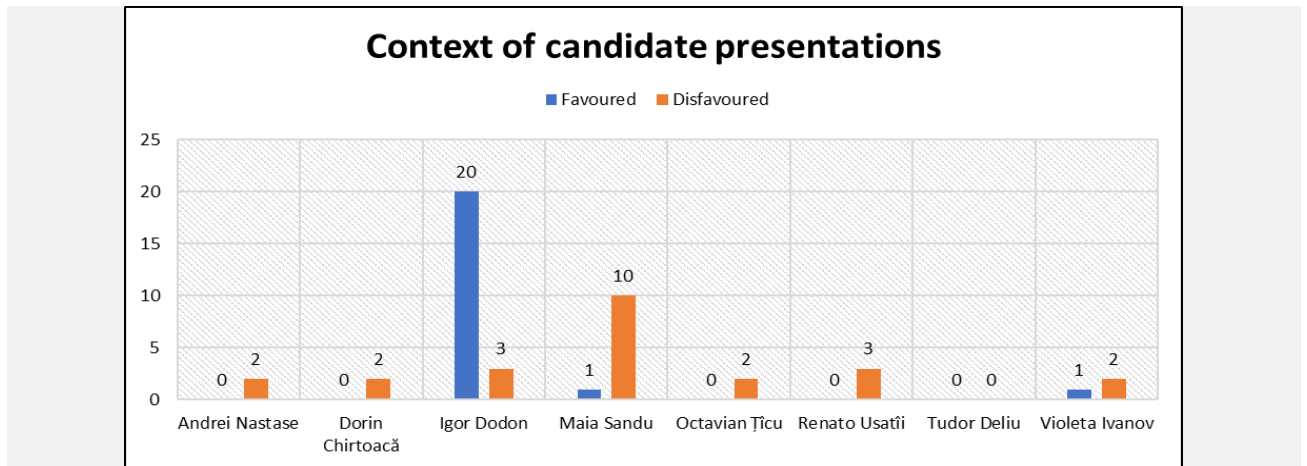
Between 1 and 10 October 2020, the candidates Dorin Chirtoacă, Octavian Țicu and Tudor Deliu appeared in neutral contexts in the electoral items, without being favoured or disadvantaged by **Timpul.md**. In addition, Andrei Năstase and Maia Sandu were placed twice in contexts that rather favoured them while Violeta Ivanov and Renato Usatii – in rather disadvantageous contexts. Igor Dodon appeared in both positions, with the balance tilting towards a larger amount of items that disadvantaged him.



Between 1 and 10 October 2020, the candidate Dorin Chirtoacă appeared only in a neutral context, without being favoured or disadvantaged in the **Unimedia.info** items. At the same time, Igor Dodon, Andrei Năstase and Violeta Ivanov appeared most often in positive contexts that favoured them. For example, Violeta Ivanov appeared periodically in advertisements disguised with news in the political or social sections, news about her statements made on Facebook, etc. During this period, too, unmarked items appeared about the activities of the Șor Party, street lighting in villages, etc. Igor Dodon appeared more often in news announcing he had taken leave on his account during the election period, that he had launched himself in the campaign, with his statements made in the show that had changed its name from "The President Replies" to "Igor Dodon Replies" etc. Octavian Țicu, Renato Usatii and Tudor Deliu also appeared once in rather favourable contexts while Maia Sandu – once in both favourable and unfavourable contexts.



During the period monitored, the candidate Tudor Deliu appeared in a neutral context on **Vedomosti.md**. The independent candidate supported by PSRM Igor Dodon was most often favoured both by the tone of the items and by the frequency of his appearances (20 times). The candidates Violeta Ivanov and Maia Sandu each appeared once in contexts that rather favoured them as well. At the same time, Maia Sandu was most often disadvantaged by the texts published by Vedomosti.md (10 cases), being covered in negative contexts, she being criticized and assaulted even in opinions, without evidence and without being offered the right of reply. Andrei Năstase, Dorin Chirtoacă, Octavian Țicu, Renato Usatii as well as Igor Dodon and Violeta Ivanov appeared in several items that disfavoured them.



2.3. General conclusions:

- In the period from 1 to 10 October 2020, the 12 online publications monitored covered the election campaign for the presidential elections mainly through the news.
- **Noi.md** published the largest number of items relevant to the election context, and **Gagauzinfo.md** - the lowest number.
- Most of the items were published in text format but there were also video and audio items, in smaller proportion.
- Most relevant items referred to the political area and the election process.
- All the six male candidates and the two female candidates for the supreme position in the state appeared as protagonists of the election stories.
- The independent candidate supported by PSRM Igor Dodon appeared most often as the protagonist.
- All the six male candidates and the two female candidates for the supreme position in the state appeared as sources of the election stories.
- The candidate Igor Dodon appeared most often as a source.
- The items published by all 12 media outlets monitored were strongly disproportionate in terms of gender, in favour of men.
- The candidate Igor Dodon had the highest media visibility in the 12 publications.
- The candidate Igor Dodon was most often placed in positive contexts that favoured him.
- The candidate Renato Usatii was the least placed in favourable contexts.
- The candidate Maia Sandu was most often placed in negative contexts that disadvantaged her.
- The candidate Violeta Ivanov was least placed in unfavourable contexts.

[Full report in Romanian](#)