

Online Media Monitoring in the Election Campaign for 2020 Presidential Elections

Report no. 7
8 – 14 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 Ţira**)

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

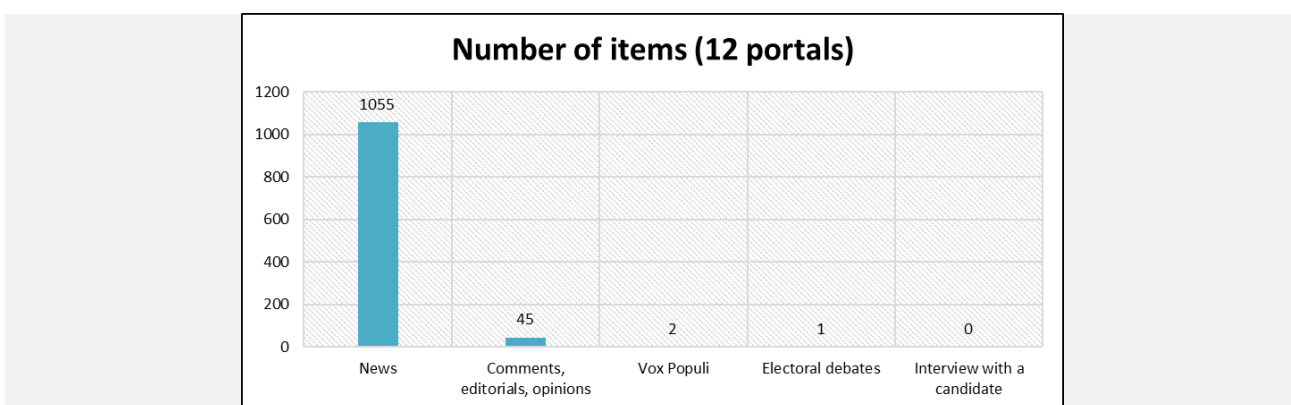
The monitoring is based on the methodology developed by Oxford Media Research Centre for the monitoring projects of the international organization Article 19: Global Campaign for Free Expression. The same methodology was used for monitoring media outlets in the election period and campaign for the 2016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

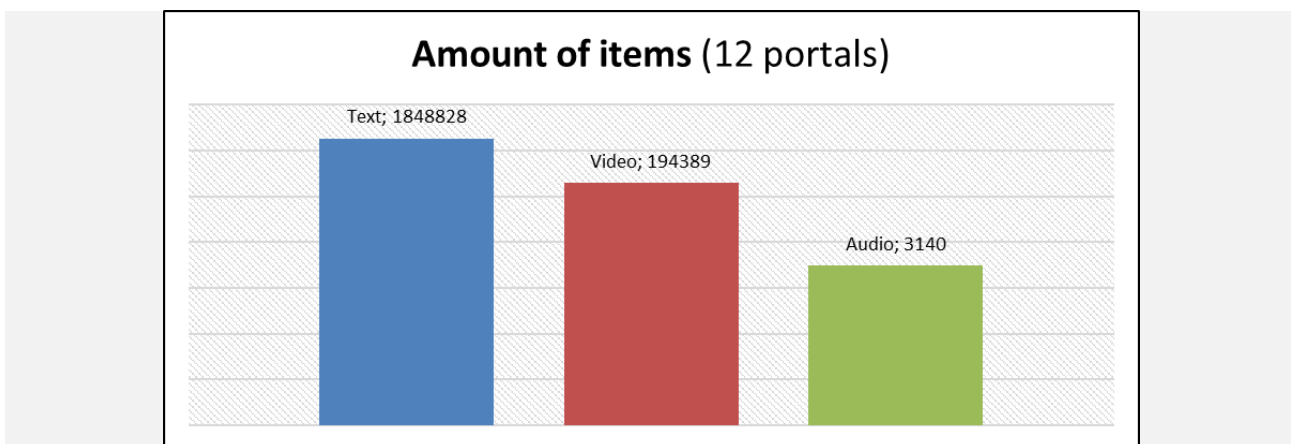
2.1 General trends

Between 8 and 14 November 2020, the 12 online media outlets monitored together published 1103 items that directly or indirectly targeted the campaign for presidential elections. Most of them were news stories (1055 or nearly 96%) that referred to the political area, the candidates with access to the second round of elections, their campaign actions, CEC work and decisions on voting in the second round in the country, in the diaspora, and by the citizens on the left bank of Nistru River, etc. At the same time, 45 items, or a little over 4% of the total, were published in the form of comments, editorials, or other opinion stories, two media reports were Vox Populi polls, and one outlet published an electoral debate.



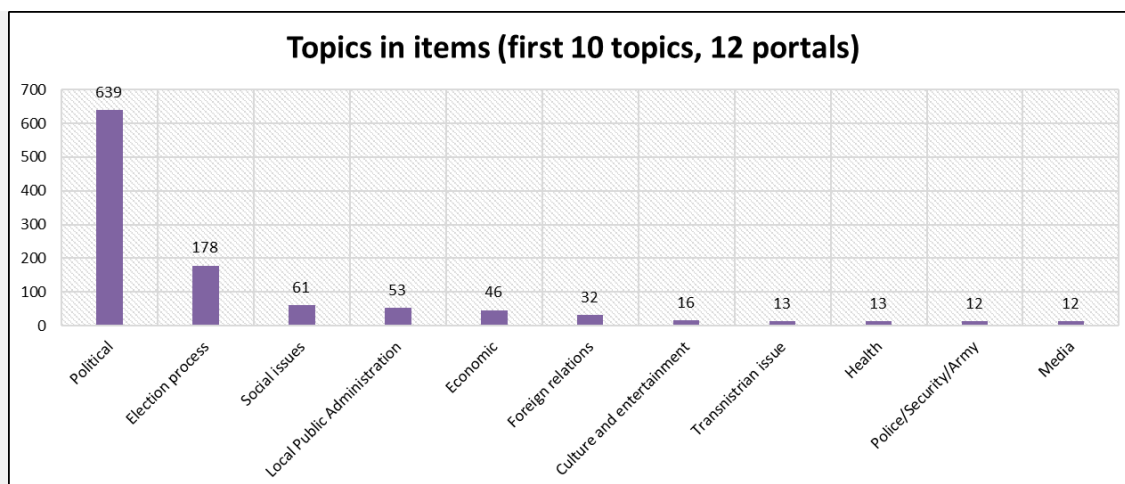
The largest number of relevant stories was published this time by **Noi.md** (211), while **Timpul.md** had the lowest number for the second time consecutively – 16 items. The other publications referred to the election campaign as follows: **Aif.md** – in 170 items; **Actualitati.md** – in 110; **Newsmaker.md** – in 92; **Kp.md** – in 90; **Vedomosti.md** – in 88; **Sputnik.md** – in 85; **Agora.md** – in 83; **Unimedia.info** – in 78 items; **Realitatea.md** – in 61; and **Gagauzinfo.md** – in 19 relevant items. At the same time, **Noi.md** published the most news stories with an election character (206), as well as an electoral debate; **Vedomosti.md** – the most comments (19); and **Sputnik.md** and **Actualitati.md** broadcast one Vox Populi poll each.

In addition, most of the stories (1090) were published as texts; in 188 cases, the texts were accompanied by videos and in 7 – by audios. The amount of the items monitored was thus quantified in characters (text) and seconds (video and audio), as follows:

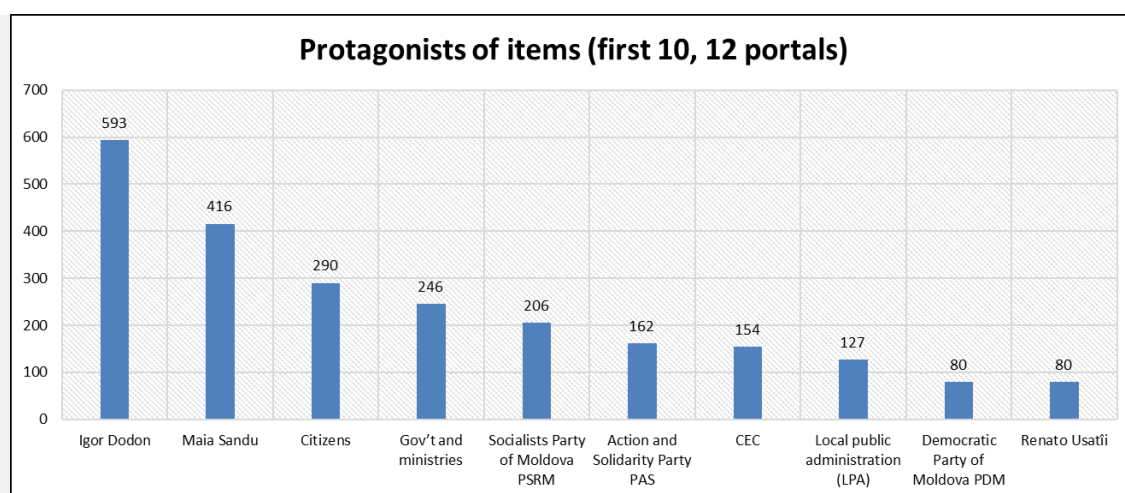


The political area clearly dominated among the topics addressed by the 12 outlets monitored during the reference period, the elements related to this thematic area being present in 639 cases, which means almost 58% of the total. The election process positioned itself at a considerable

distance, being approached in 178 items, or the social issues were 61 times targeted in election contexts. Other topics, such as the work of the local public administration, economy, foreign relations, culture, health or the Transnistrian issue in the election context were addressed much less frequently in the stories of the 12 online media outlets monitored.

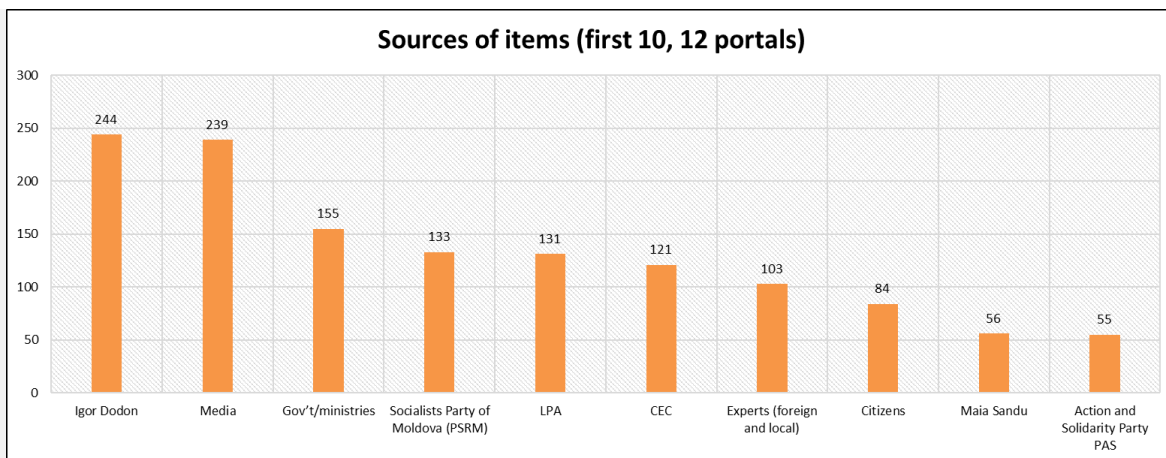


Both the candidates who have access to the second round of the presidential elections and the other 5 male candidates and one female candidate, registered for the first round, appeared during the reference period as protagonists of the media reports, the focus being on the independent candidate supported by the Party of Socialists (PSRM) Igor Dodon who was the protagonist of 593 items, and on the candidate of the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) Maia Sandu who had 416 appearances as protagonist. Similarly, among the 43 different categories, the male/female citizens were targeted 290 times as protagonists, followed by the representatives of the Government, with 246 such appearances, by those of the PSRM, mentioned 206 times, of PAS, concerned in 162 items, or of the Central Election Commission (CEC), covered 154 times as protagonists. The other male candidates and one female candidate without access to the second round were the protagonists of media reports as follows: Renato Usatîi - 80 times; Andrei Năstase - 27 times; Violeta Ivanov - 21 times; Dorin Chirtoacă - 15 times; Tudor Deliu - 9 times; and Octavian Țîcu - 8 times.

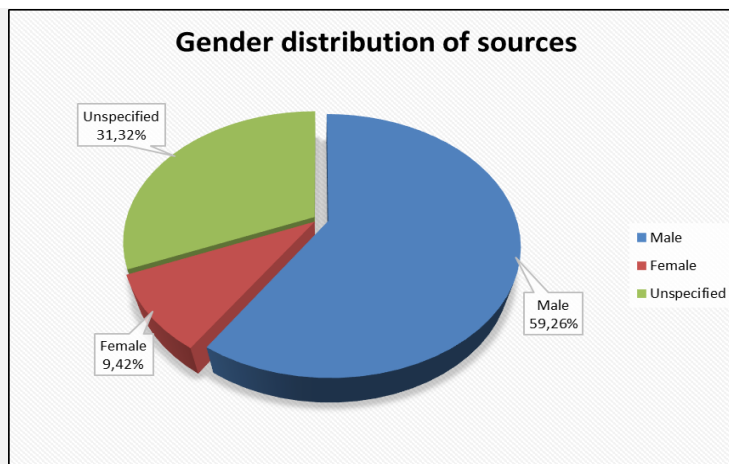


From 8 to 14 November 2020, the 12 online publications quoted a total of 1603 sources, including 36 different categories. Candidate Igor Dodon was the most often quoted in this capacity (244 times). At an insignificant distance were other media sources, quoted 239 times, and the representatives of the Government ranked third, being quoted 155 times. In the same context, the PSRM representatives were also quoted - 133 times; those of the local public administration - 131 times; of CEC - 121 times; and the male/female experts, quoted 103 times. In her turn, the

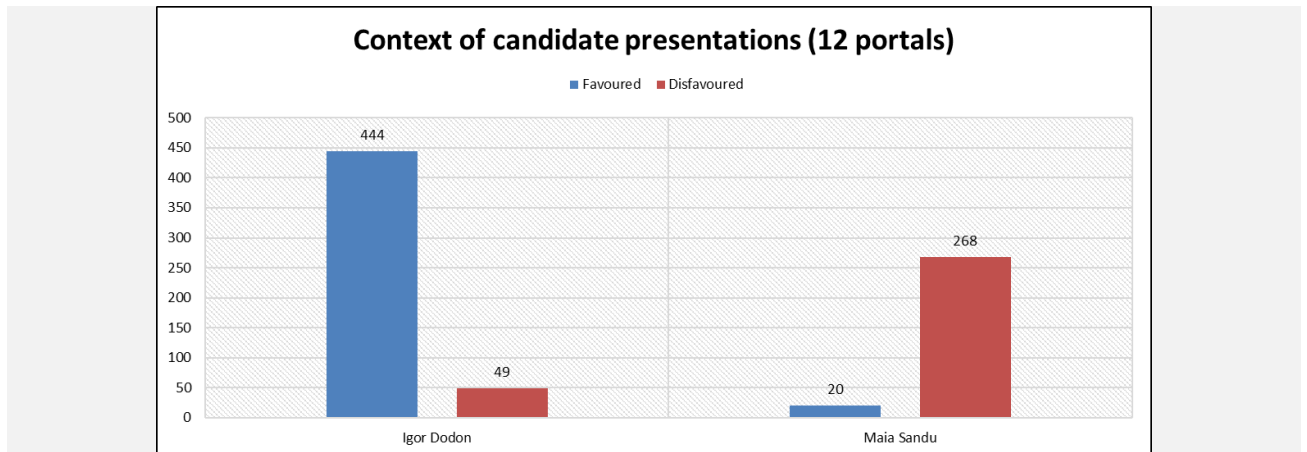
candidate Maia Sandu had the capacity of a source 56 times in the stories with a direct or indirect election character. Among other candidates for the position of president without access to the second round, Renato Usatîi (25 times) and Andrei Năstase (3 times) also appeared as sources for the stories published by the 12 online media outlets.



In the same connection, the sources quoted by the 12 online media outlets monitored further strongly lacked balance in terms of gender, to the detriment of women. Specifically, 950 of the total number (or almost 60%) were men, and 151 sources (or over 9%) were women. For other 502 sources (or over 31%), their gender was not specified.



The candidates with access to the second round of the presidential elections appeared both in neutral and in positive or negative contexts in the stories of the 12 online media outlets monitored. However, Igor Dodon had several appearances in a positive context, which favoured him (444 cases). At the same time, he appeared 49 times in rather unfavourable situations. On the other hand, Maia Sandu was disadvantaged in more than half of the items in which she was the protagonist (268 times), while in 20 cases, she was covered in contexts that rather favoured her.



In conclusion, following the monitoring of the editorial behaviour of the 12 online media outlets between 8 and 14 November 2020, the following trends can be established:

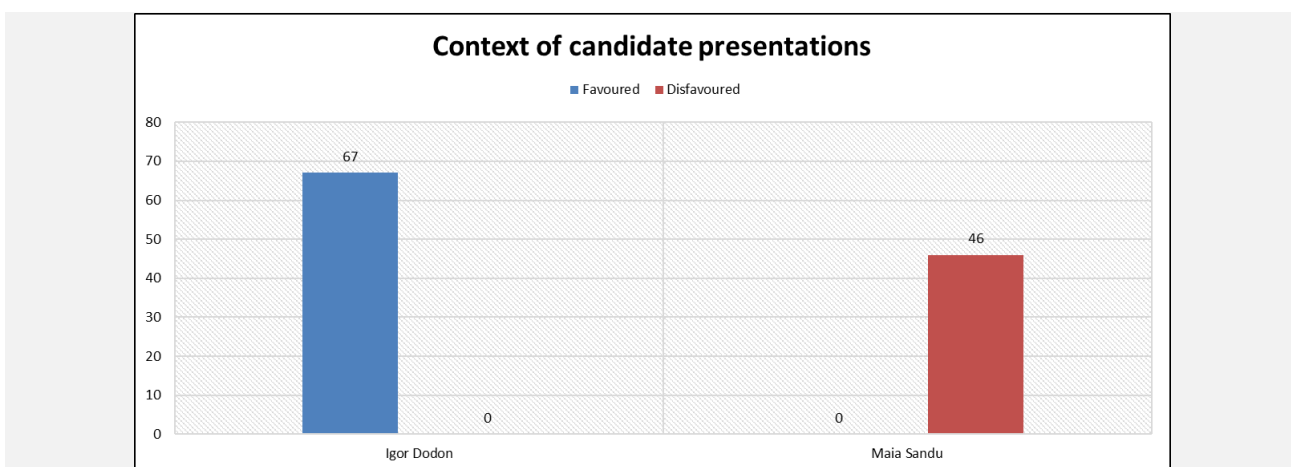
- **Actualitati.md, Aif.md** and **Kp.md** had a similar editorial behaviour in this reporting period as well, with an obvious and pronounced partisan character. The three publications clearly favoured and promoted Igor Dodon, and clearly disfavoured Maia Sandu. The campaign of discredit, assault, and defame through false information and discrimination against her continued.
- **Noi.md, Vedomosti.md** and **Sputnik.md** favoured Igor Dodon through the tone of coverage and the candidate's presentation in positive contexts. Maia Sandu was disadvantaged by the three publications.
- **Gagauzinfo.md** paid relatively little attention to the last week of the presidential election campaign and particularly focused on the candidate Igor Dodon, favouring him in most cases where he appeared as the protagonist.
- **Unimedia.info** addressed in particular political issues, with a focus on the campaign actions of the candidate Igor Dodon who appeared several times in contexts that favoured him.
- **Agora.md** and **Newsmaker.md** had a relatively balanced and, on the whole, impartial editorial policy, and the candidates for the position of president with access to the second round were most often presented in a neutral, but also positive or negative contexts; however, without a clear tendency to favour or disfavour them.
- **Realitatea.md** covered the last week of the election campaign by presenting the actions of the candidates in the presidential elections. Candidate Igor Dodon appeared most of the time in an unfavourable context.
- **Timpul.md** paid the least attention to election issues during the period monitored. Igor Dodon was more often placed in unfavourable contexts.

2.2 Editorial behaviour of the publications



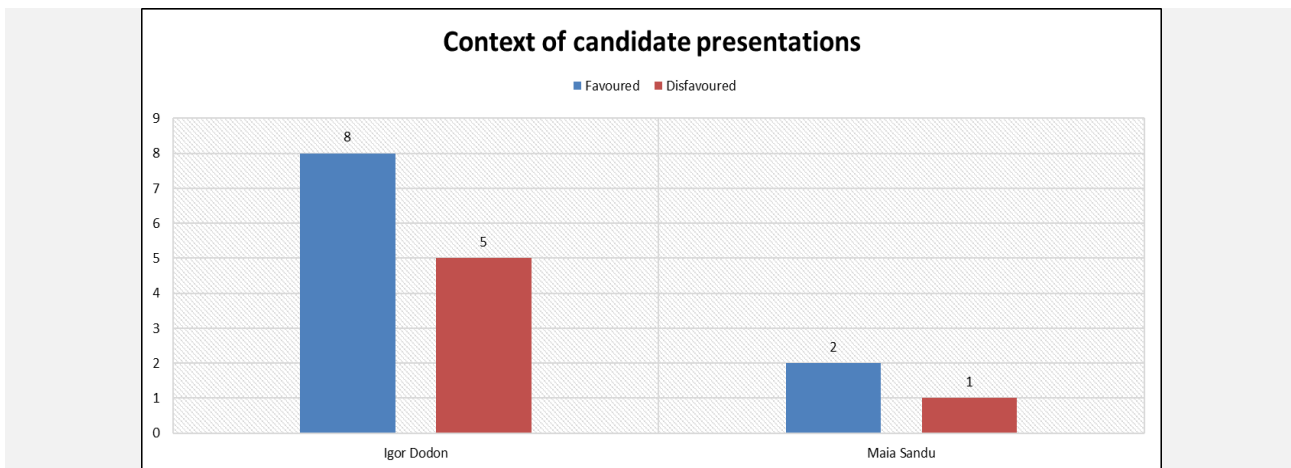
Actualitati.md

The stories with a direct or indirect election character, published on **Actualitati.md** between 8 and 14 November 2020, were biased, had a single source of information, and openly and obviously favoured the candidate Igor Dodon, all stories placing him in positive contexts. Candidate Maia Sandu, in her turn, was openly disadvantaged in 46 of 47 cases in which she appeared as a protagonist, being assaulted, criticized, and defamed through false information, speculations and insinuations, in both news and opinions. The publication **Actualitati.md** never offered Maia Sandu the right to reply.



Agora.md

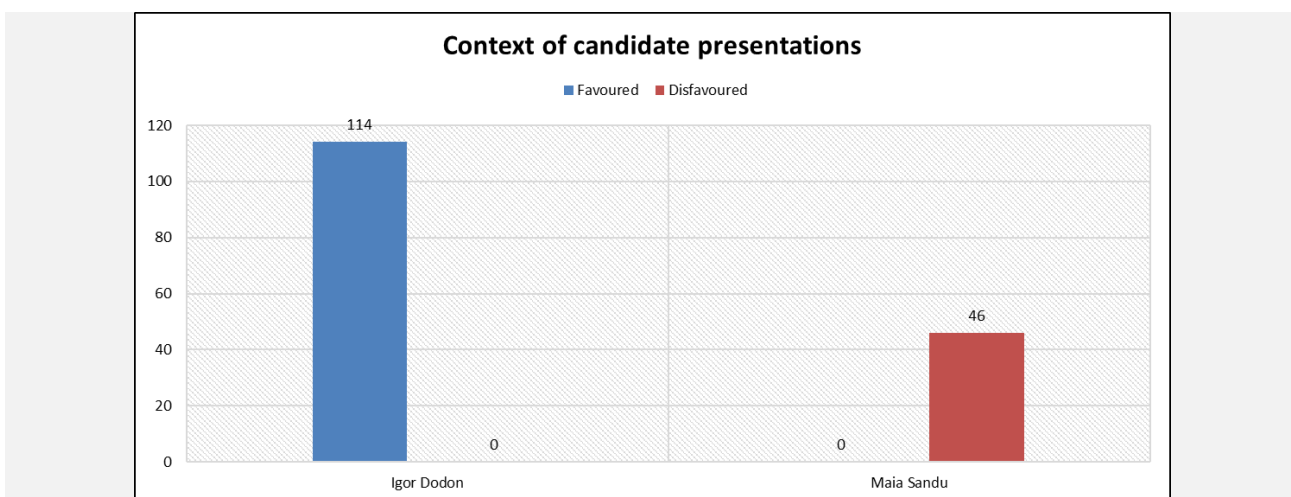
Agora.md covered the last week of the election campaign in a relatively balanced and equidistant manner, without interpretations of facts or statements. In most cases, the texts were unbiased in relation to the sources and the protagonists, presenting them in a neutral manner, with the presence of replies in the necessary cases. Both Igor Dodon and Maia Sandu generally enjoyed a neutral editorial treatment by this publication. However, in 8 cases Igor Dodon was rather favoured, directly or indirectly, and placed in a rather unfavourable context in 5 other cases. Maia Sandu, in her turn, enjoyed a rather positive media coverage twice and had a rather negative one – once. However, no obvious tendency to favour or disfavour Igor Dodon or Maia Sandu was found.



**АРГУМЕНТЫ
И ФАКТЫ** В МОЛДОВЕ

Aif.md

From 8 to 14 November 2020, **Aif.md** continued to obviously and strongly promote Igor Dodon, both in its news and opinions. Specifically, he was favoured in all the items in which he appeared as a protagonist (86 times) as well as in 28 other cases indirectly, thus enjoying an exclusively substantial positive media coverage. Maia Sandu, on the other hand, was placed in an exclusively negative context, which obviously disadvantaged her in all 46 cases in which she was the protagonist. The **Aif.md** publication further allowed personal attacks, unproven and unfounded allegations, fakes and denigrations against the candidate Maia Sandu, without her opinion being presented at least once.

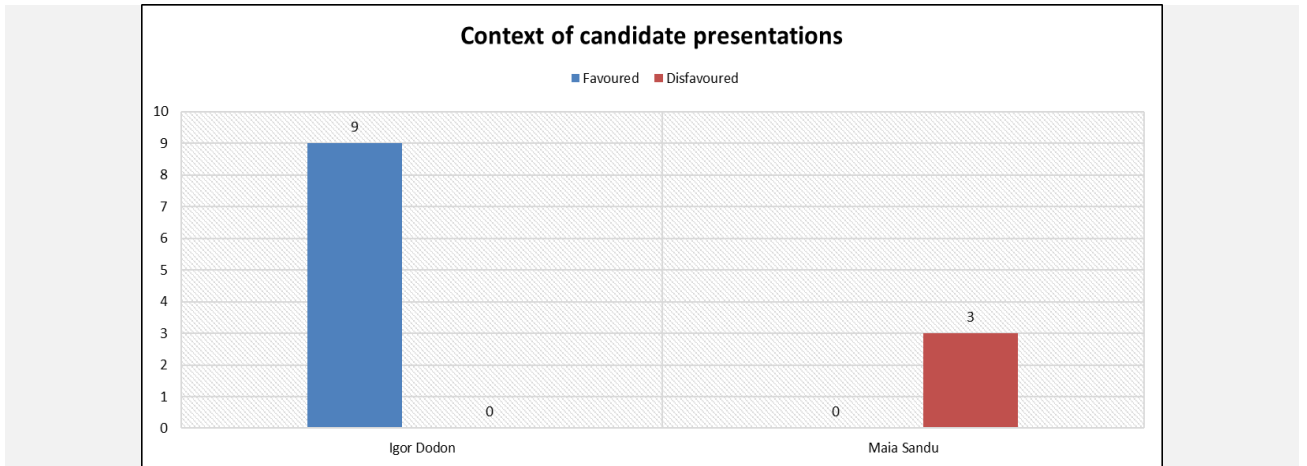



Gagauzinfo.MD

Gagauzinfo.md

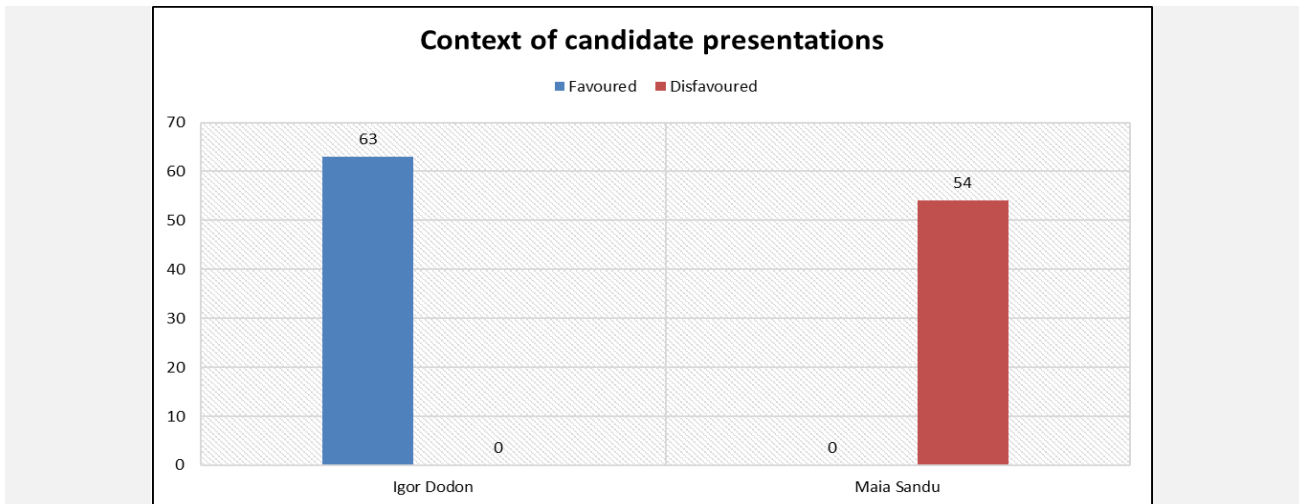
Between 8 and 14 November 2020, the regional publication **Gagauzinfo.md** had a less balanced editorial policy than in the previous reporting periods, the candidates with access to the second round of the presidential election being covered with emphasis put on bias. Candidate Igor Dodon


was thus rather favoured in 9 of 11 cases in which he was the protagonist, and the candidate Maia Sandu was rather disadvantaged in half of the cases in which she was the protagonist (3 out of 6).




МОЛДОВА ▾
Kp.md

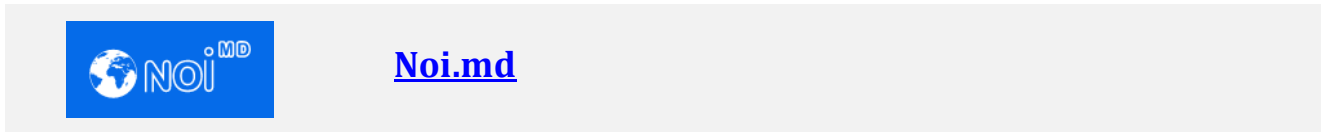
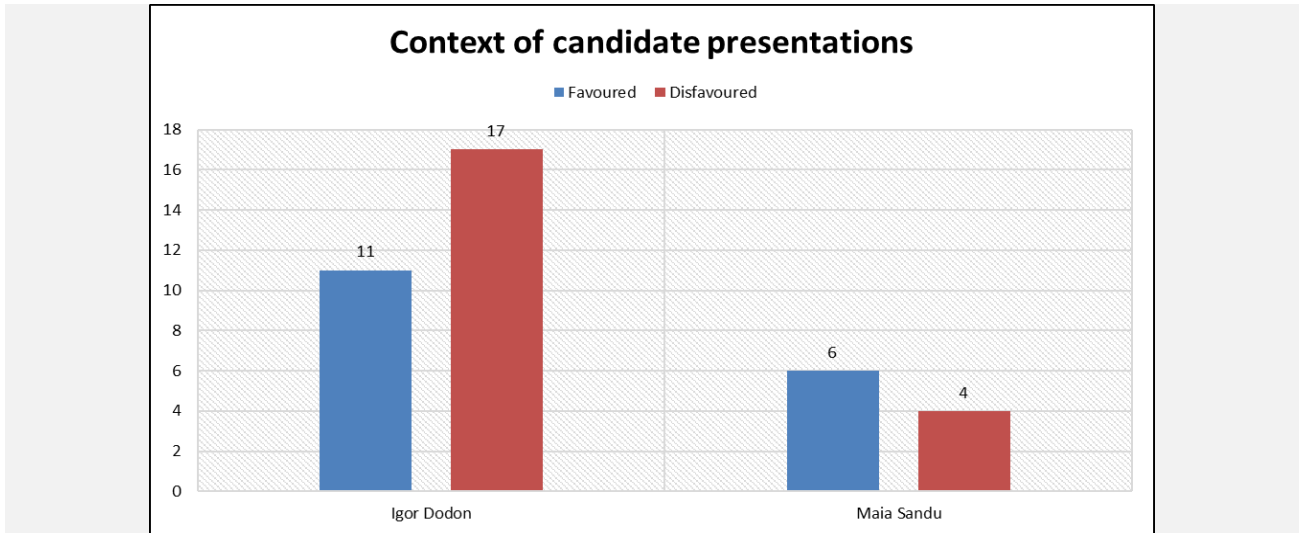
The **Kp.md** publication further openly favoured Igor Dodon, both in its news and opinions of various authors, including foreign experts, MPs, etc. He enjoyed 63 cases of clear favouritism, including in all cases in which he was the protagonist of the stories (51 times) as well as in other 12 cases when he was indirectly favoured. On the other hand, Maia Sandu was further subject to a continuous campaign of criticism, defame, assault, slander, etc., without being granted the right of reply. Specifically, she was disadvantaged in 54 cases, including 48 in which she was the protagonist, and in other 6 indirectly, being placed in exclusively negative and offensive contexts.



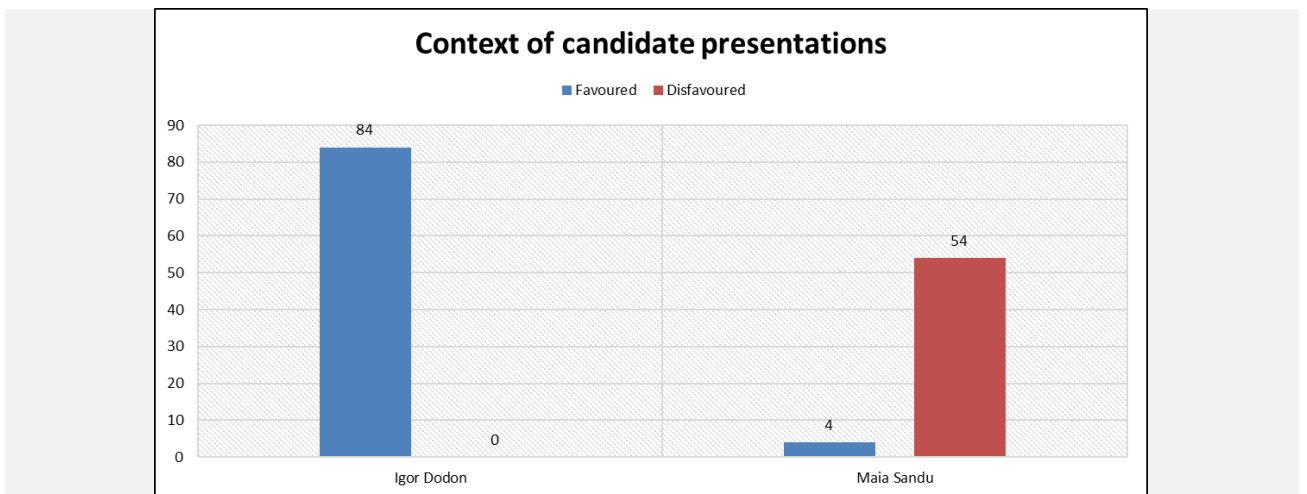

Newsmaker.md

During the period covered by this report, **Newsmaker.md** generally covered the candidates for the position of president of the Republic of Moldova who remained in the race in a balanced

manner, most of the times presenting them in neutral contexts. However, both Igor Dodon and Maia Sandu also appeared in contexts that rather favoured or disfavoured them. Specifically, Igor Dodon was indirectly favoured 11 times, and indirectly disadvantaged 17 times, and Maia Sandu was placed in rather favourable contexts in 6 cases, and in a rather unfavourable one – in 4 cases. However, no tendency by the newsroom to obviously favour or disfavour Igor Dodon or Maia Sandu was found.



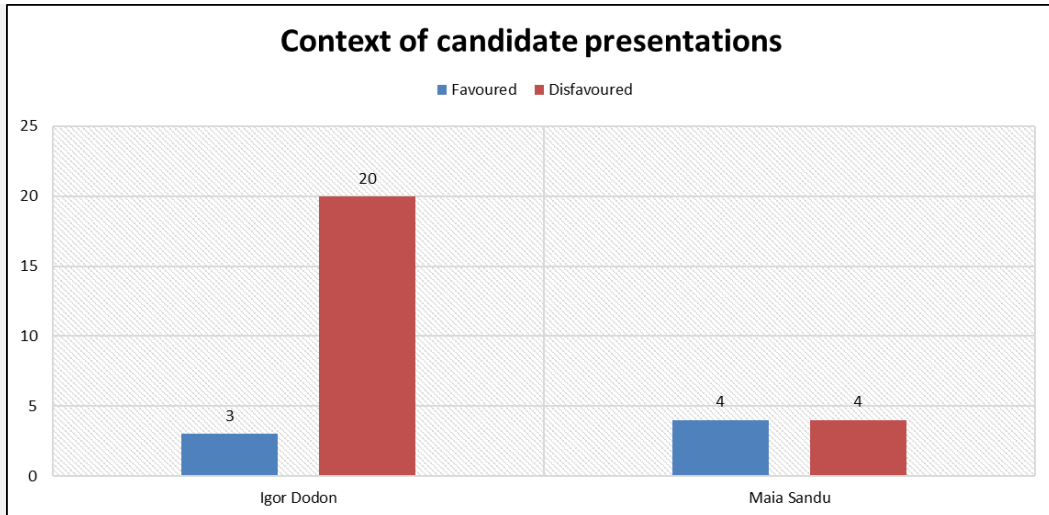
During the period covered by this report, the online publication **Noi.md** favoured and further promoted the candidate Igor Dodon, in both its news and comments. The candidate supported by PSRM was placed in a positive context in most of the stories in which he was the protagonist (84 out of 111 cases), and never in unfavourable contexts. Maia Sandu, on the other hand, had a pronounced negative editorial treatment, being disadvantaged in 54 cases out of 68 in which she was the protagonist. The disfavoured treatment took place both in news items, which included a number of statements and allegations without proof or without presenting the candidate's opinion, and in opinions. She was also placed 4 times in positive contexts that indirectly favoured her.





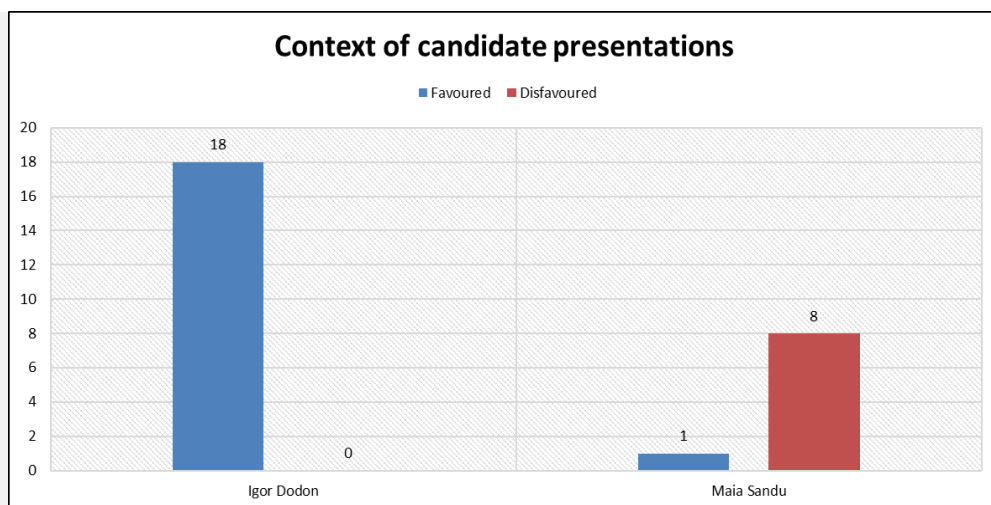
[Realitatea.md](https://www.realitatea.md)

During the period covered by this report, the candidate Igor Dodon was in several cases placed in rather unfavourable contexts (20 times out of 36 in which he was the protagonist), but also 3 times in contexts that indirectly favoured him. Maia Sandu in addition to neutral contexts, 4 times appeared in a context that rather favoured her and as many times in one that disadvantaged her.

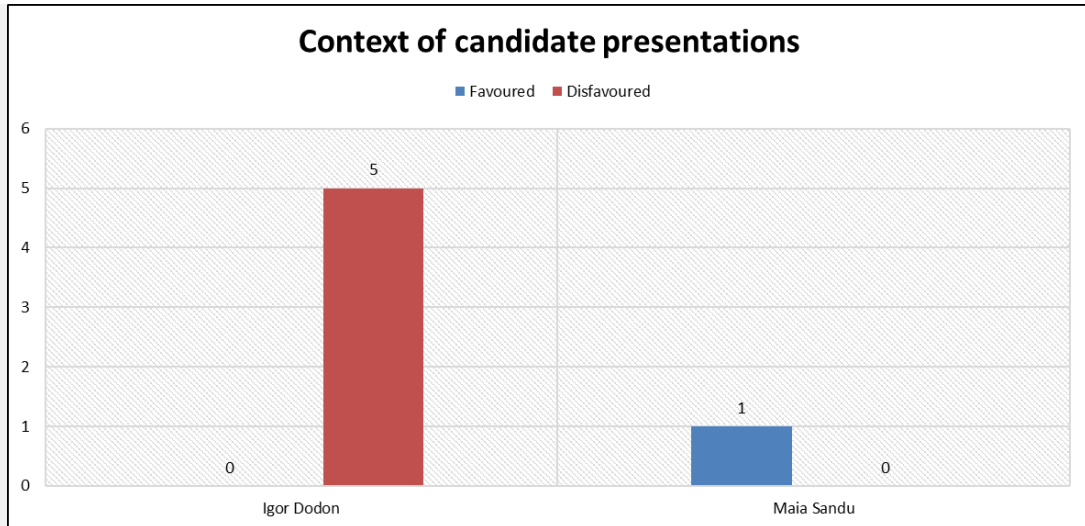


[Sputnik.md](https://www.sputnik.md)

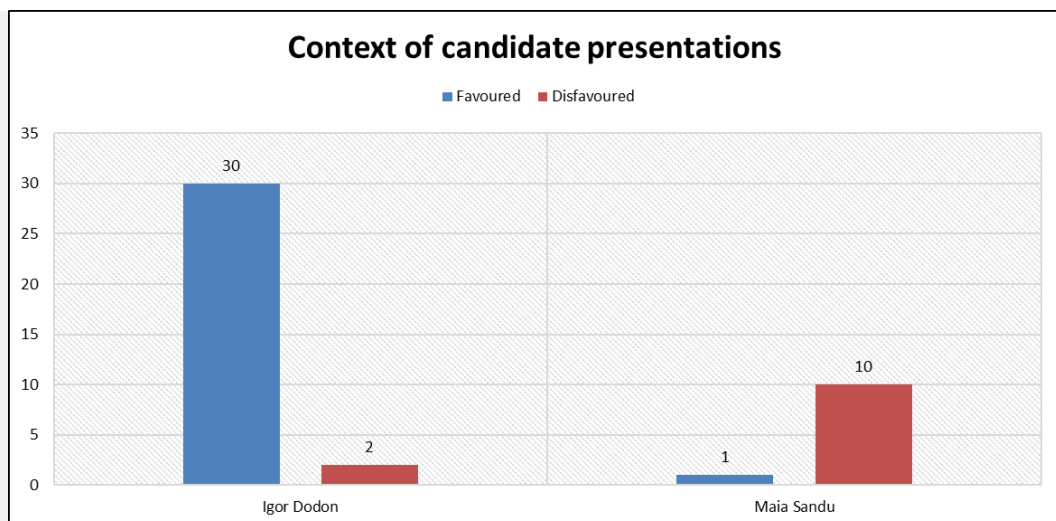
Between 8 and 14 November 2020, the candidate Igor Dodon was placed in positive contexts, which rather favoured him in **Sputnik.md** items in over half of the cases in which he appeared as the protagonist (18 out of 34). Candidate Maia Sandu enjoyed one rather favourable appearance, while in 8 cases, the media context disadvantaged her.



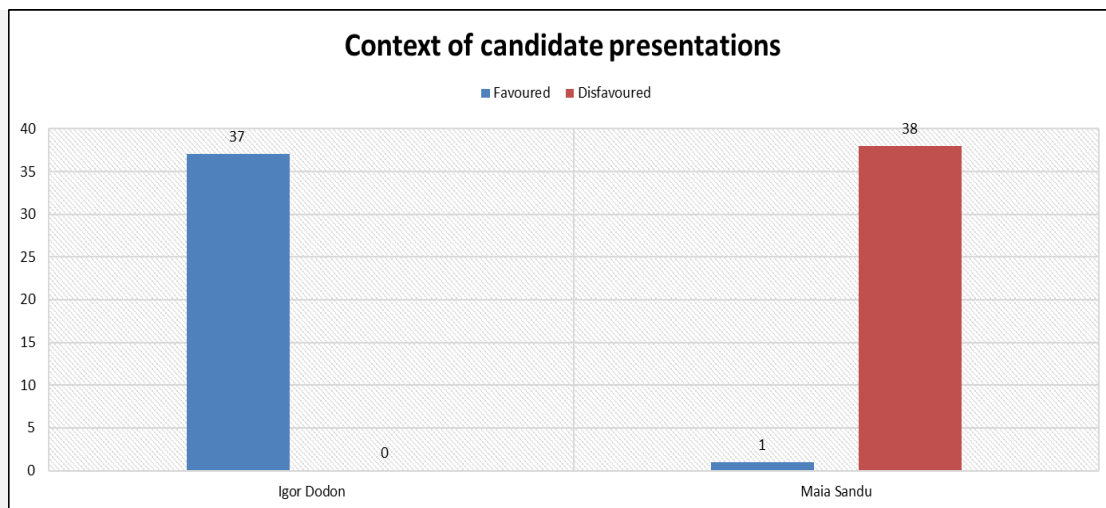
During the period covered by this monitoring, the candidate Maia Sandu was placed in the **Timpul.md** stories once in a context that rather favoured her, and the candidate Igor Dodon – 5 times in rather unfavourable positions.



During the period monitored, the candidate Igor Dodon was most often placed in a positive context that rather favoured him, directly or indirectly (30 times out of 38 in which he was the protagonist), but the context also rather disadvantaged him twice. Maia Sandu, in addition to neutral media coverage, was also covered 10 times in rather negative contexts as well as once in one that favoured her.



From 8 to 14 November 2020, the candidate Igor Dodon was substantially and clearly favoured by **Vedomosti.md**, in both its news and opinions. He appeared in an exclusively positive context 37 times, i.e. in all cases in which he was the protagonist (33 times) and in 4 other cases in which he was indirectly favoured. Candidate Maia Sandu, on the other hand, appeared in a negative context in most cases in which she was the protagonist, which disadvantaged her (in 38 cases out of 41), and was once placed in a favourable position.



2.3. General conclusions:

- In the period from 8 to 14 November 2020, the 12 online publications monitored covered the campaign for the presidential elections mainly through news but also, more rarely, through comments, two Vox Populi polls, and one electoral debate.
- **Noi.md** published the highest number of items relevant to the election context, and **Timpul.md** – the lowest number.
- All 12 outlets monitored approached mainly the political area in an election context, and at a noticeable distance – the election process itself.
- Both candidates with access in the second round of the presidential elections and the other 5 male candidates and one female candidate for the supreme position in the state appeared as protagonists of the election items.
- The stories published by all 12 media outlets monitored strongly lacked balance 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](#)