coaliția civică pentru alegeri libere și corecte

Media Monitoring (Online Press) in the Election Period and Campaign for 2020 Presidential Elections

Report no. 1
15 – 30 September 2020

(general conclusions)

National Endowment *for* Democracy
Supporting freedom around the world

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.md[1] (Russian), Agora.md[2] (Romanian), Aif.md[3] (Russian), Gagauzinfo.md[4] (Russian), Kp.md[5] (Russian), Newsmaker.md[6] (Russian language version), Noi.md[7] (Romanian language version), Realitatea.md[8] (Romanian), Sputnik.md[9] (Romanian), Timpul.md[10] (Romanian), Unimedia.info[11] (Romanian), Vedomosti.md[12] (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.

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[1] Founded by **Iuri Vitneanski**, PSRM member, currently vice praetor of Botanica district of Chișinău

[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 compay with six shareholders, including companies of the businessman **Vasile Chirtoca,** PSRM councilor in Chișinău 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 disfavours 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 conclusions

Between 15 and 30 September 2020, the 12 web portals monitored published a total of 1861 stories that directly or indirectly targeted the election period/campaign. The absolute majority of the items (1764 texts or 94.8% of the total) were simple or detailed news stories that concerned the potential candidates, the political parties they represent, the work of CEC, etc. Other 93 items (5% of the total) were comments, editorials or other opinion stories. There were also published two interviews with the candidates or potential candidates and two Vox Populi polls, i.e. short direct interviews with citizens on topics related to the presidential elections.
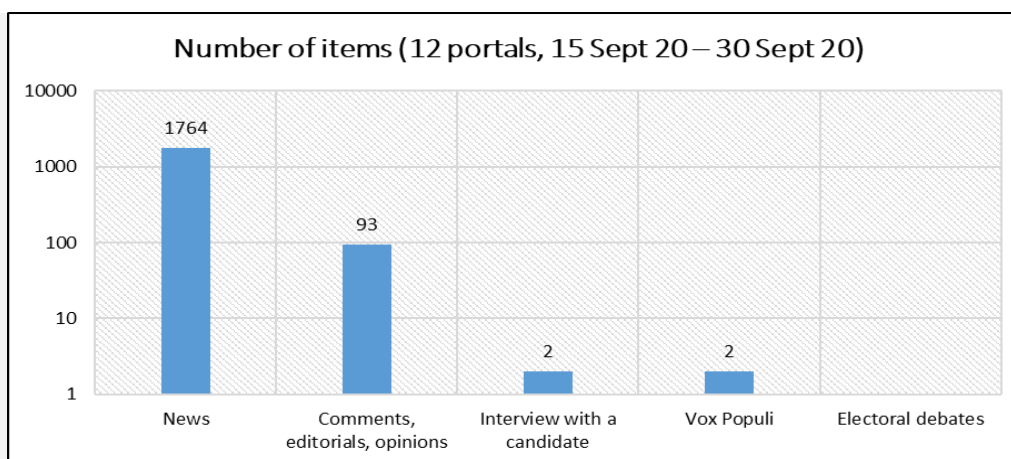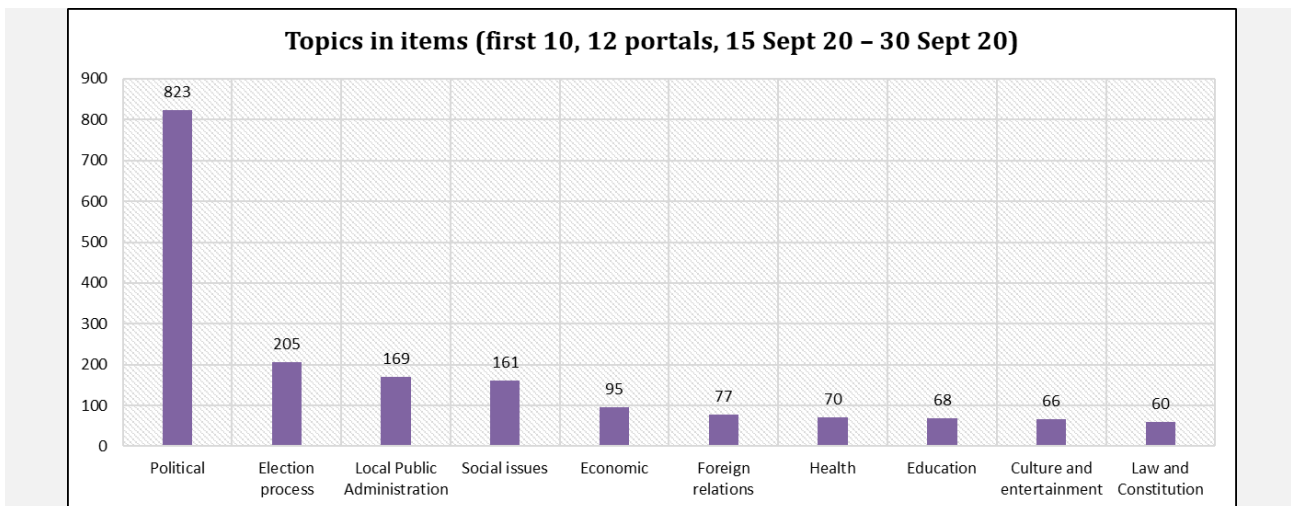

The absolute leader by the number of political and electoral texts during this period was the portal Noi.md portal, which published 383 relevant stories for this monitoring, followed by Aif.md - 238 texts, Agora.md - 211, Actualitati.md - 181, Realitatea.md - 165 and Unimedia.info - 157 stories. Newsmaker.md had 133 relevant items, Kp.md - 126, Vedomosti.md - 117, and Sputnik.md - 92. The fewest items directly or indirectly related to the 2020 presidential elections were inserted by the regional portal Gagauzinfo.md - 14, and Timpul.md - 44.
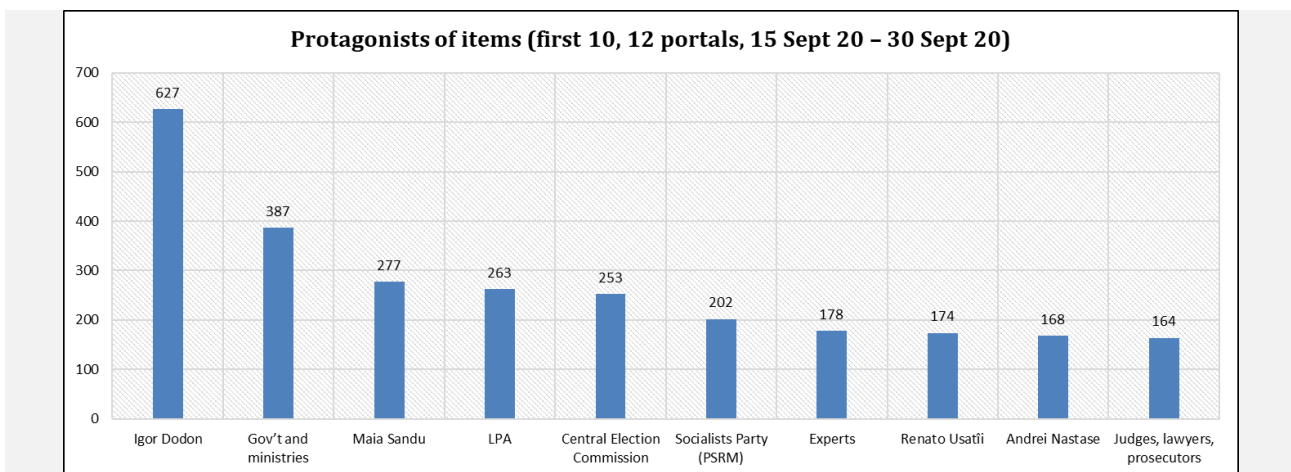
The items had different formats, most of them containing only text, but some also had multimedia elements, with video (206 materials) or audio images (9) attached to the actual text of the story or placed on sites without text. The volume of the items monitored was quantified in characters (text) and seconds (video and audio), as follows:
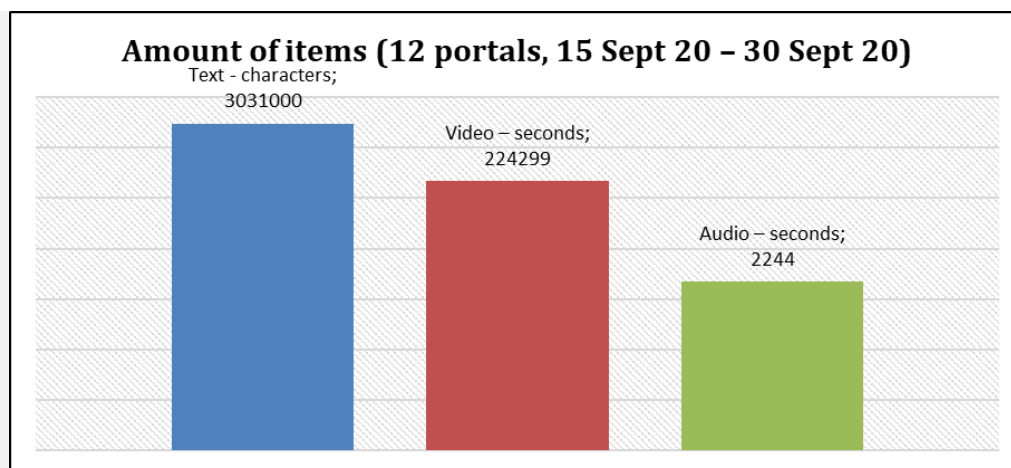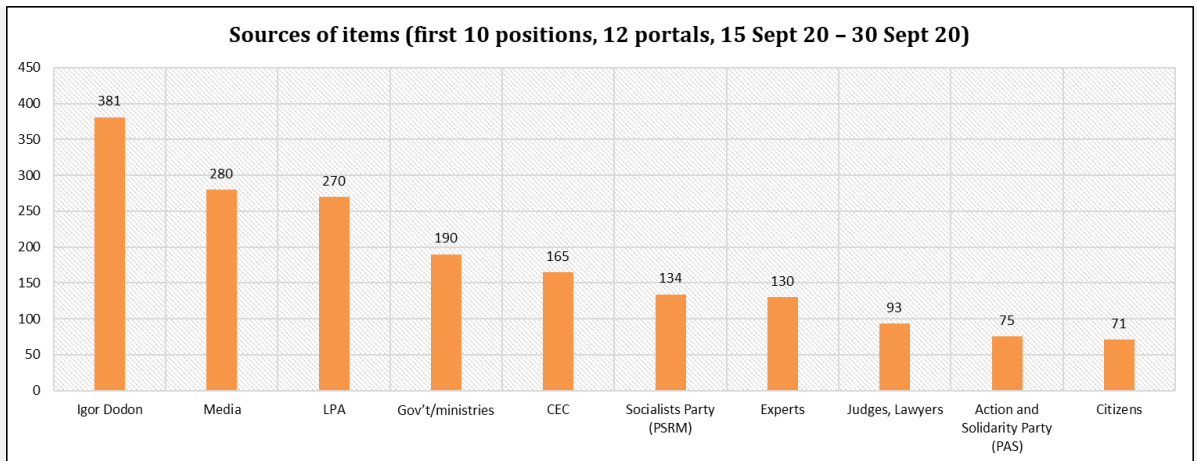
Most of the texts published referred to the behaviour and statements of some candidates or potential candidates, allegations launched against them by their opponents or other persons, the replies of the accused, and the election process in general. A great deal of the items covered the work of local public administration bodies, especially of Chisinau City Hall and General Mayor Ion Ceban in detail and only in a positive context. Some social aspects were also addressed more often in the electoral context; less often were addressed the economic situation, foreign relations, health issues, education and culture, the rule of law and the fight against corruption.

Topics in items (first 10, 12 portals, 15 Sept 20 – 30 Sept 20)

| Topic	Value
Political	823
Election process	205
Local Public Administration	169
Social issues	161
Economic	95
Foreign relations	77
Health	70
Education	68
Culture and entertainment	66
Law and Constitution	60

During this period, Igor Dodon, the incumbent president and independent candidate for president, supported by the Socialists Party (PSRM), appeared most often as protagonists (persons or institutions covered in the media reports). Dodon was thus the protagonist in 627 stories, or in every third item monitored. At a great distance, as item protagonists, follow the government officials Maia Sandu, the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) candidate for president, the local public administration (especially of Chișinău), and the Central Election Commission (CEC).

Protagonists of items (first 10, 12 portals, 15 Sept 20 – 30 Sept 20)

Protagonist	Value
Igor Dodon	627
Gov't and ministries	387
Maia Sandu	277
LPA	263
Central Election Commission	253
Socialists Party (PSRM)	202
Experts	178
Renato Usatîi	174
Andrei Nastase	168
Judges, lawyers, prosecutors	164

The 12 portals quoted 2379 sources in total, with Igor Dodon ranking first by the number of quotes (381 cases). At the same time, the items referred to other media sources (280 cases) and 270 times quoted the representatives of the local authorities, especially the Capital's General Mayor. CEC members and other election officials were quoted as a source of information 165 times. Many stories had a single source of information or generally did not specify the source. If relating the total number of stories to the number of sources quoted, we find that, on average, an article had 1.28 sources.

Sources of items (first 10 positions, 12 portals, 15 Sept 20 – 30 Sept 20)

Category	Value
Igor Dodon	381
Media	280
LPA	270
Gov't/ministries	190
CEC	165
Socialists Party (PSRM)	134
Experts	130
Judges, Lawyers	93
Action and Solidarity Party (PAS)	75
Citizens	71

The materials were strongly unbalanced in terms of gender, with two thirds (66.75%) of the sources quoted being male and only almost 8% female, the other sources being unspecified.

Gender distribution

Unspecified 25,26%
Female 7,99%
Male 66,75%

- Male
- Female
- Unspecified
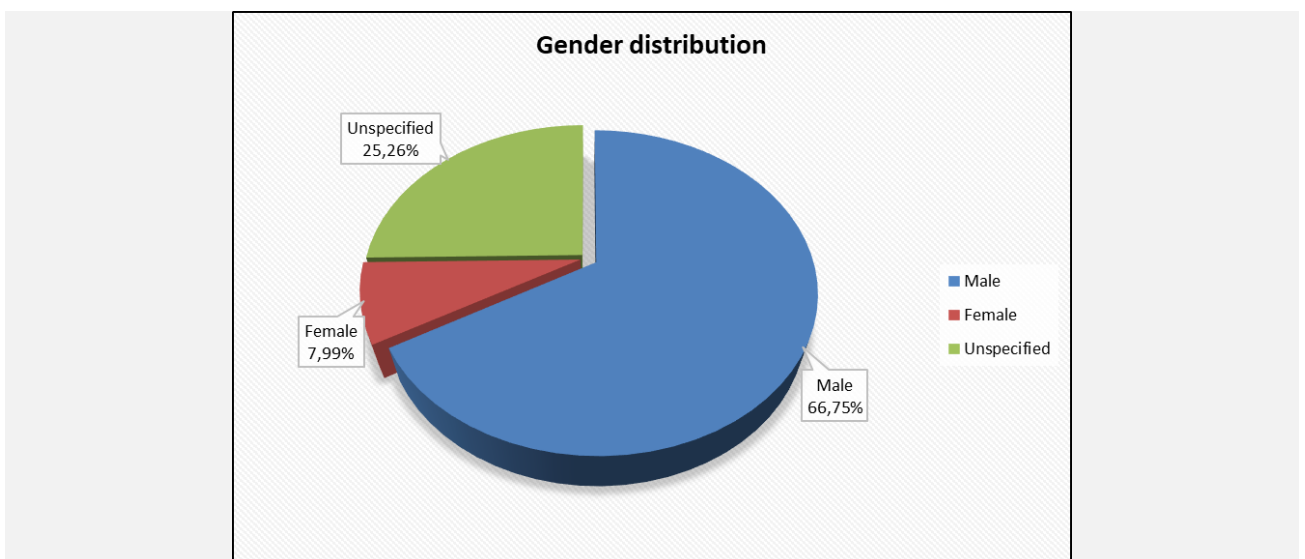
If cumulating the quantitative indicators of the 12 portals monitored, Igor Dodon is the candidate with the highest visibility in the online media, also being presented mainly in a positive context (740 favourable appearances on all 12 media sources). In the same media sources, in the reporting period, the candidate Maia Sandu accumulated a large number of presentations in a negative context (199 cases), mainly on the portals Actualitati.md, Aif.md, Kp.md, Noi.md and Vedomosti.md, which adopted editorial policies to discredit Maia Sandu.

Context of candidate presentations (12 portals, 15 Sept 20 – 30 Sept 20)

■ Favoured ■ Disfavoured

Candidate	Favoured	Disfavoured
Andrei Nastase	29	37
Andrian Candu	4	18
Dorin Chirtoacă	6	35
Igor Dodon	740	99
Maia Sandu	31	199
Octavian Țîcu	3	8
Renato Usatîi	8	55
Tudor Deliu	4	29
Violeta Ivanov	26	23
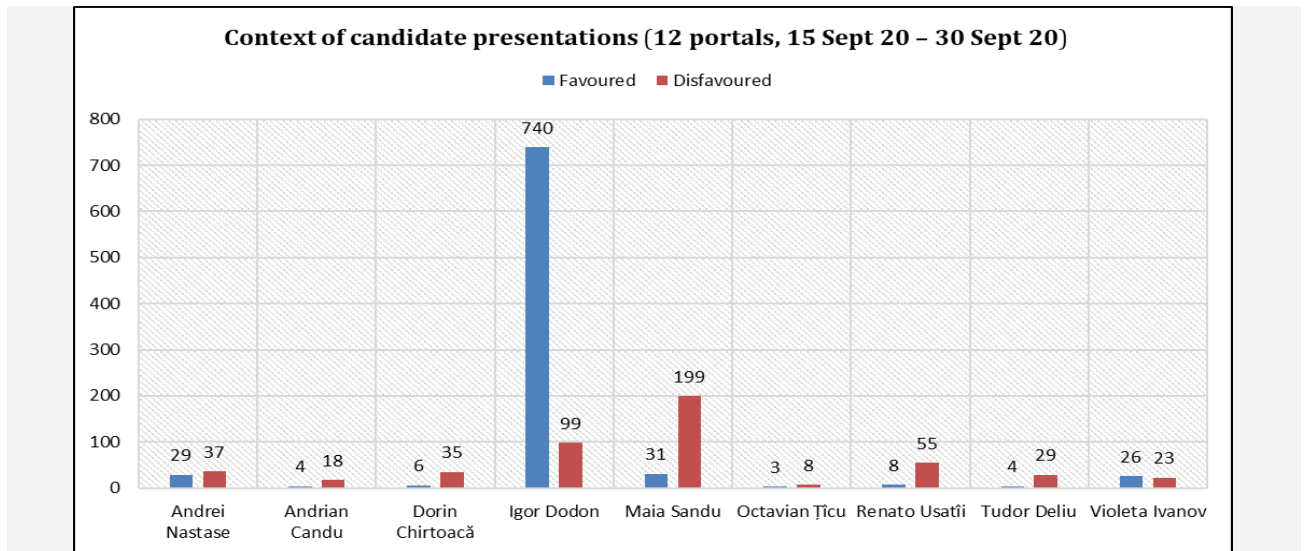
Following the monitoring of the editorial behaviour between 15 and 30 September 2020, the following trends were registered:

- **Actualitati.md, Aif.md** and **Kp.md** portals have similar editorial policies, the actions, statements and comments of the same political actors being interpreted in a biased manner. The portals openly favour and intensely promote the independent candidate supported by PSRM, Igor Dodon. Dodon's political opponents, mainly PAS candidate Maia Sandu, were disadvantaged and discredited in almost all the items in which they were targeted, with the frequent use of personal qualifications and assaults, and without being given the right to reply;
- **Noi.md, Sputnik.md** and **Vedomosti.md** portals also favour Igor Dodon by the tone of coverage and this candidate's presence in a positive context. At the same time, the PAS candidate Maia Sandu is obviously disadvantaged, and the allegations of some candidates and potential candidates are not balanced with the opinion/position of the person concerned;
- The few news items published by the **portal Gagauzinfo.md** directly favoured Igor Dodon;
- By the tone and frequency of positive presentations, the **Unimedia.info** portal favours Igor Dodon. PPDA candidate Andrei Năstase also appeared often in a positive context, and the candidate of the "Șor Party" Violeta Ivanov was promoted in obvious advertising materials that were not marked accordingly;
- **Agora.md** and **Newsmaker.md** portals have relatively balanced editorial policies, the authors of the items being, in general, impartial in relation to the item sources and protagonists, and the candidates and potential candidates for the position of president are often presented in neutral, but also in positive or negative context, and yet, without a tendency to favour or disfavour them;
- **Realitatea.md** portal presented the candidates and potential candidates for the position of president both neutrally and positively or negatively. Maia Sandu was targeted more often in items that favoured her, while Violeta Ivanov was promoted in stories with an obvious advertising character that were not properly marked.
- The absolute majority of the items published by **Timpul.md** portal that targeted Igor Dodon presented him in a negative context, while Maia Sandu was more often favoured.

2.2 Contexts of candidate presentation
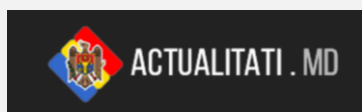
Actualitati.md

Most items on political issues, published by Actualitati.md, had a single source of information and were biased, and the portal's editorial policy aimed to favour openly the independent candidate Igor Dodon, supported by PSRM. He is presented as an effective national leader, with detailed reports on his and PSRM's social initiatives, Dodon's meetings in the country's regions and talks with the Russian President Vladimir Putin, etc. frequently published. In total, between 15 and 30 September, Igor Dodon was favoured, directly or indirectly, in 130 stories. In contrast, the PAS candidate Maia Sandu was disfavoured in all the items in which she was targeted (43 cases). The portal published its own items or took over the statements made by some PSRM representatives, in which M. Sandu is accused of being supported by Vladimir Plahotniuc, of being legally illiterate, of lying when she states that a falsification of the elections is being prepared etc. Some of the stories in which M. Sandu appears in a negative context are fixed on special banners at the bottom of the page and are repeated with each piece of news for several days. Other candidates and possible candidates, especially Renato Usatii, Andrei Nastase, Dorin Chirtoaca and Andrian Candu, were also accused and assaulted in the stories published by Actualitati.md during this period.

Context of candidate presentations
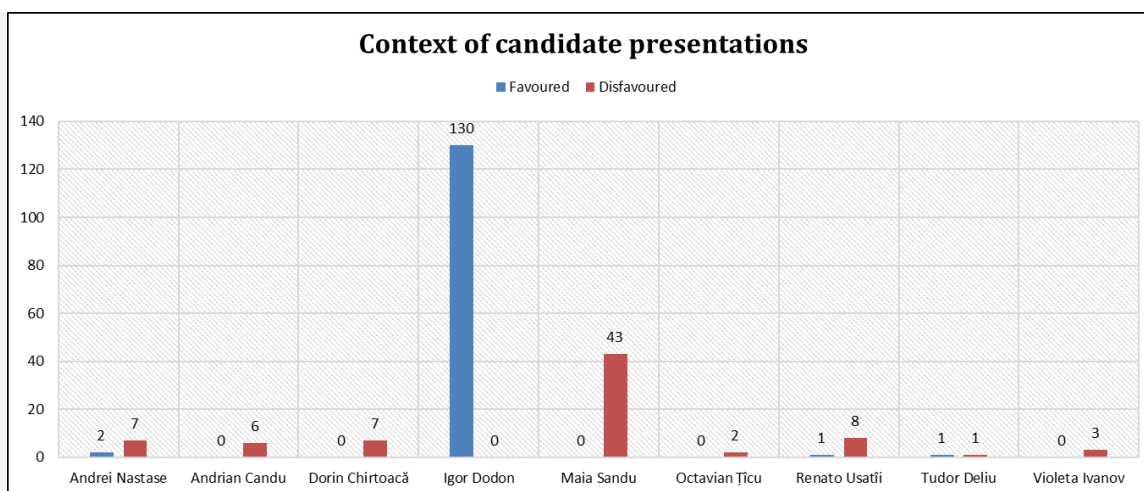
Agora.md

The editorial policy of Agora.md portal during the reporting period was balanced, the authors of the items were, in general, impartial in relation to the item sources and protagonists, and most of the candidates were presented in a neutral way. At the same time, many of the portal's news items are based on a single source. The independent candidate supported by PSRM Igor Dodon was presented in different contexts, sometimes positive, and other times negative.

Context of candidate presentations
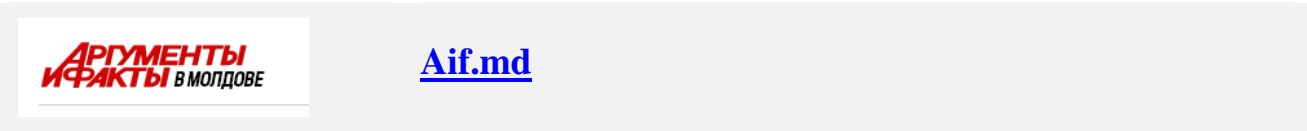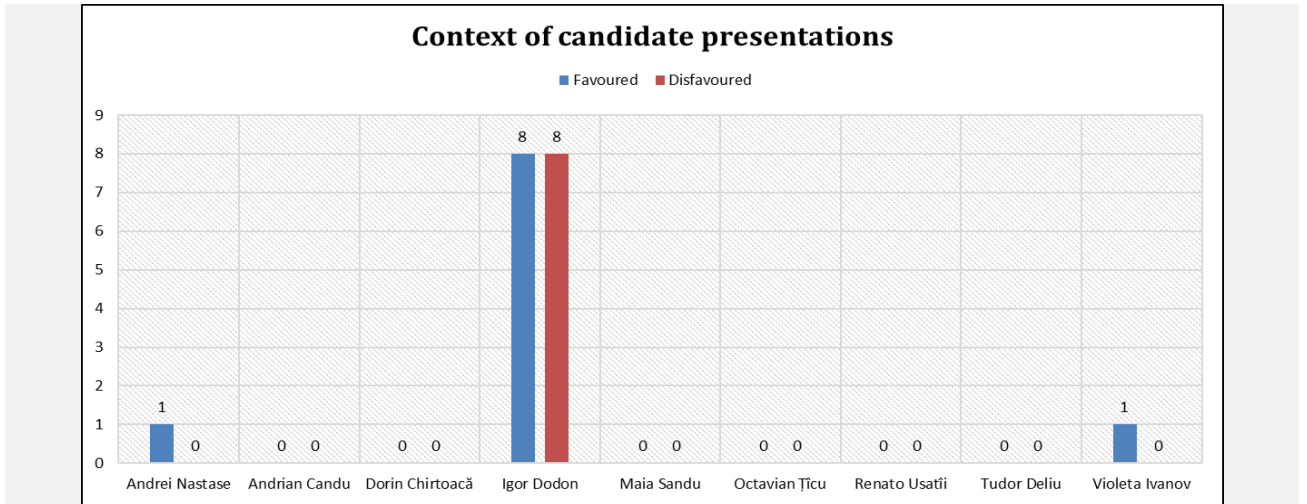
Aif.md

In terms of editorial behaviour, the Aif.md portal is, practically, the spokesperson of the independent candidate supported by PSRM Igor Dodon and of the General Mayor of Chișinău Ion Ceban. Hence, each post on Facebook of the two immediately becomes a reason for news, often accompanied by pictures and videos. Such statements are presented as such, without being supplemented with other information or opinions, even less so presenting the replies of the accused. If Igor Dodon participates in a TV show, gives an interview or delivers a speech, Aif.md makes a series of news items from those events. Except for Maia Sandu, sometimes "packaged" with other opposition leaders, the other candidates are practically missing from this portal's news, not even when they are registered with the CEC. In total, Igor Dodon was favoured 209 times in the portal's stories. The PAS candidate Maia Sandu, on the contrary, was assaulted in several news items (39 cases), including personal attacks, especially by the PSRM deputy Bogdan Țîrdea, but without being given once the right to reply, as in the case of Andrei Năstase, Renato Usatii or Dorin Chirtoaca.

Context of candidate presentations
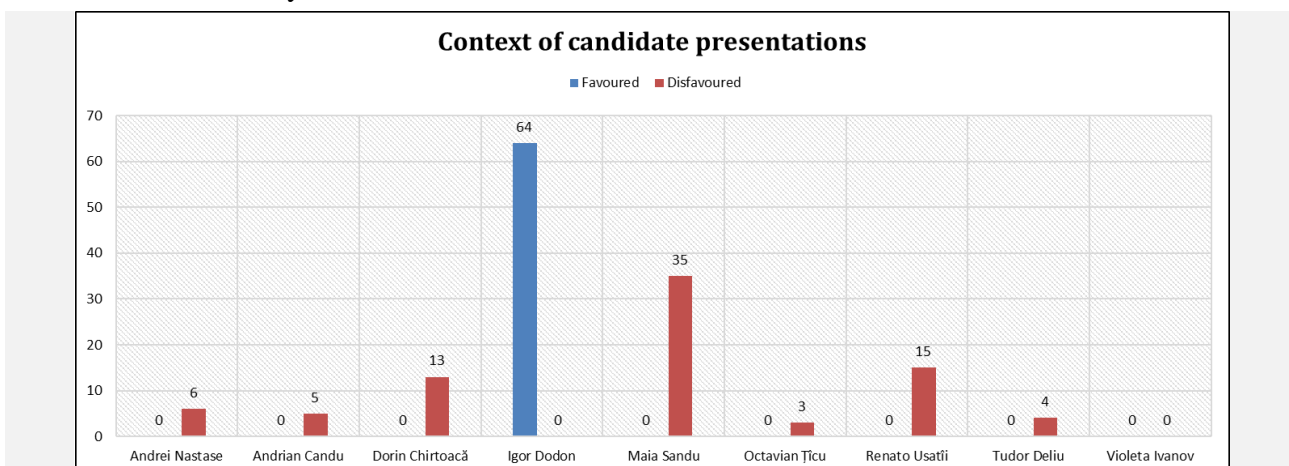
Gagauzinfo.MD   **Gagauzinfo.md**
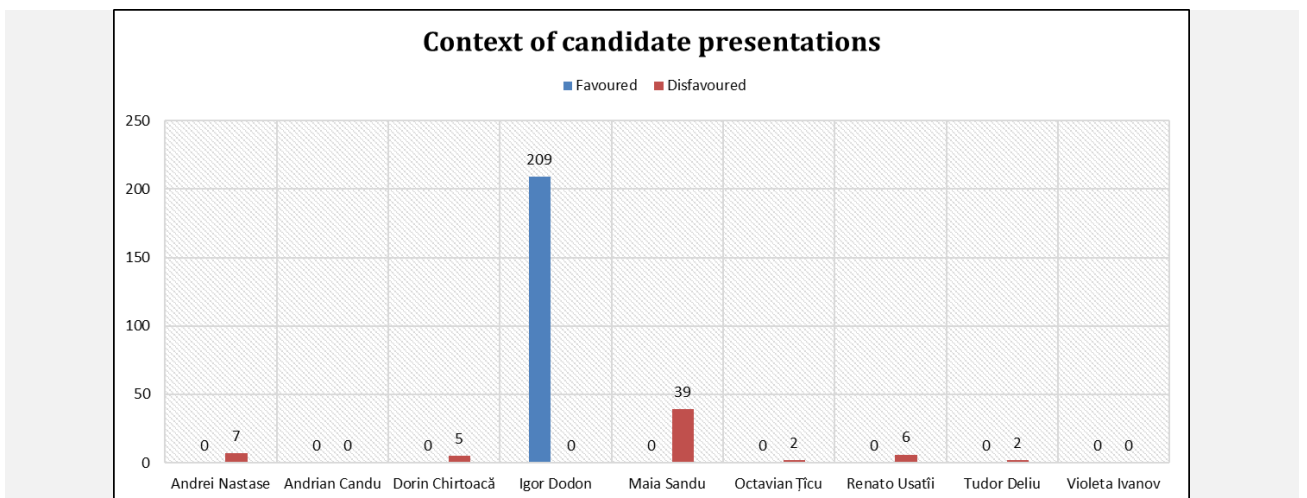
Most of the Gagauzinfo.md news items that directly or indirectly concerned the election period and campaign for the 2020 presidential elections directly favoured the independent candidate supported by PSRM Igor Dodon (9 cases).

Context of candidate presentations

■ Favoured ■ Disfavoured

Candidate	Favoured	Disfavoured
Andrei Nastase	0	0
Andrian Candu	0	0
Dorin Chirtoacă	0	0
Igor Dodon	9	0
Maia Sandu	0	0
Octavian Țîcu	0	0
Renato Usatîi	0	0
Tudor Deliu	0	0
Violeta Ivanov	1	0

КОМСОМОЛЬСКАЯ ПРАВДА   МОЛДОВА ∨   **Kp.md**
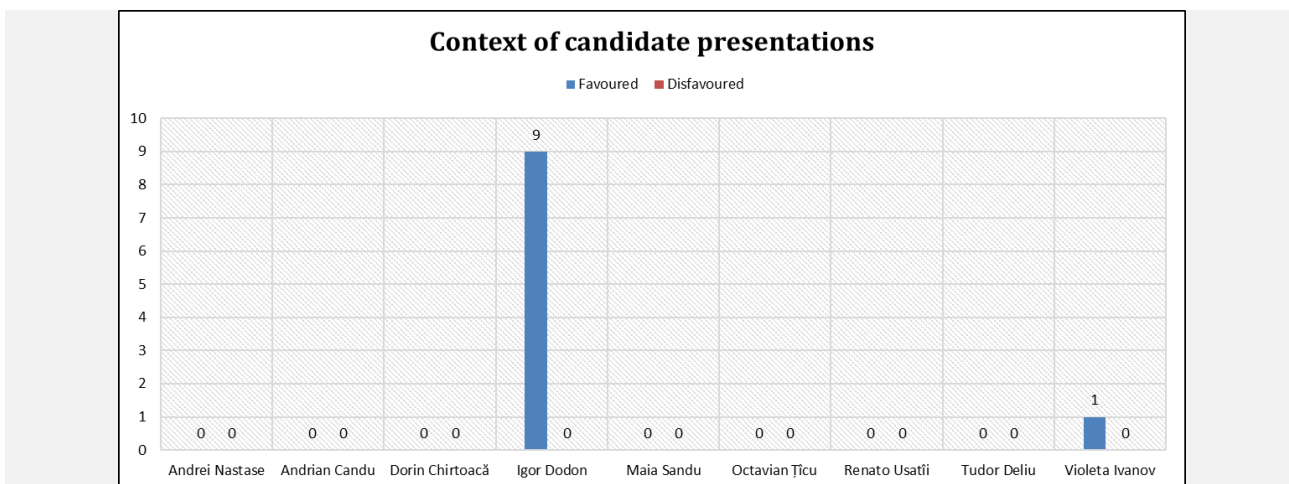
During the reporting period, the Kp.md portal had a biased behaviour, favouring Igor Dodon openly, both in the news and in the comments of the newsroom authors, which used qualifications and personal attacks, or through the defamatory comments of other authors, such as the MP from PSRM Bogdan Țîrdea, without ever providing the right of reply to those directly targeted.

Hence, the independent candidate supported by PSRM Igor Dodon was presented exclusively in a positive context (64 cases), other candidates and potential candidates (Maia Sandu, Renato Usatii, Dorin Chirtoaca, Andrei Nastase, Tudor Deliu) being disadvantaged by presentations each time in a negative context, allegations without the right of reply, persiflage and personal attacks. In general, this portal's editorial policy is similar to that of Actualitati.md or Aif.md, often publishing similar texts and comments by the same authors.

Context of candidate presentations

■ Favoured ■ Disfavoured

Candidate	Favoured	Disfavoured
Andrei Nastase	0	6
Andrian Candu	0	5
Dorin Chirtoacă	0	13
Igor Dodon	64	0
Maia Sandu	0	35
Octavian Țîcu	0	3
Renato Usatîi	0	15
Tudor Deliu	0	4
Violeta Ivanov	0	0

NewsMaker   **Newsmaker.md**

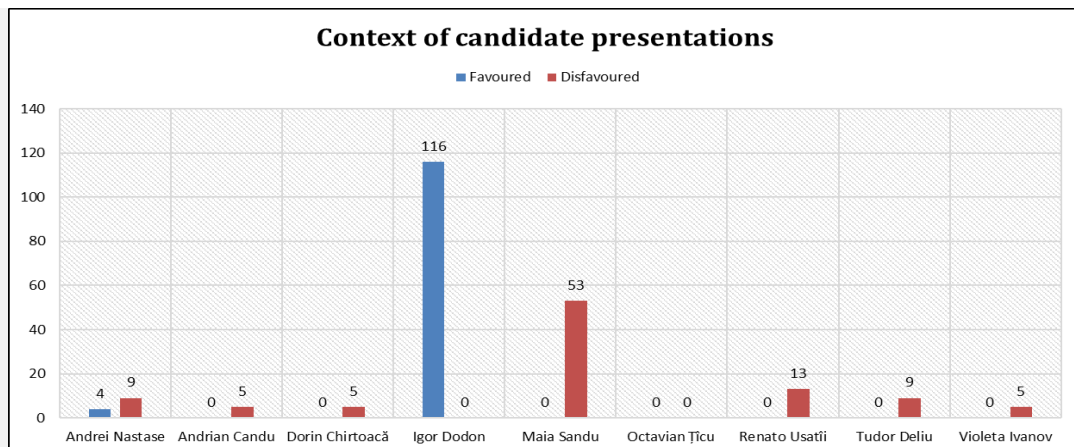Between 15 and 30 September, the Newsmaker.md portal had a relatively balanced editorial behaviour, the candidates and potential candidates for the position of president being presented most of the time in a neutral context, but also in positive or negative ones, without a tendency to favour or disfavour any political mouthpieces.

The independent candidate supported by PSRM Igor Dodon was presented both in a negative context (mainly by covering the allegations made against him by his political opponents), but also in a positive context (including by covering his social initiatives). At the same time, the large number of news items about the current activities of the Chișinău City Hall indirectly favours the candidate Igor Dodon.

Context of candidate presentations

■ Favoured ■ Disfavoured

Candidate	Favoured	Disfavoured
Andrei Nastase	0	1
Andrian Candu	0	0
Dorin Chirtoacă	1	0
Igor Dodon	34	28
Maia Sandu	4	4
Octavian Țîcu	0	0
Renato Usatîi	4	2
Tudor Deliu	1	2
Violeta Ivanov	1	6

Noi.md   **Noi.md**
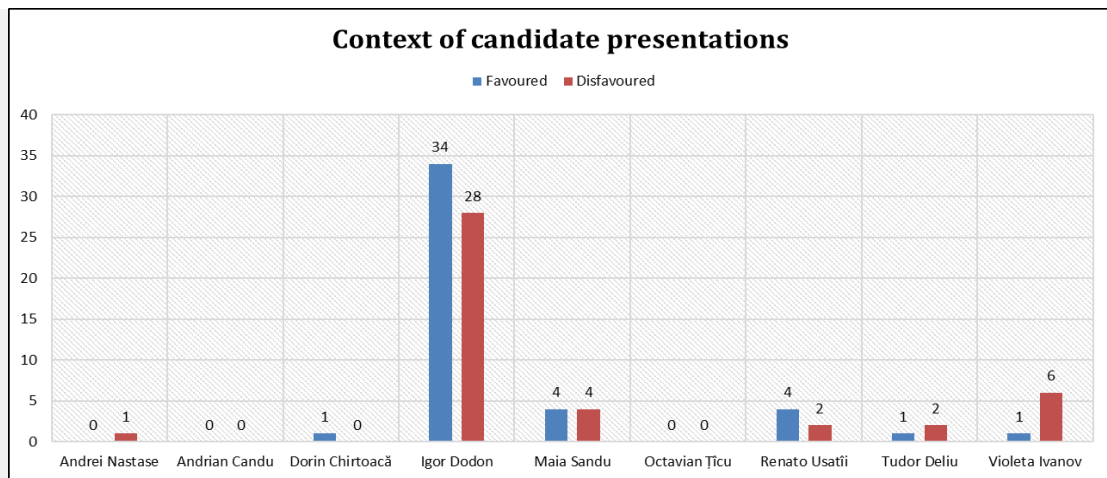
By the tone of coverage and appearance only in a positive context of the independent candidate supported by PSRM Igor Dodon (116), it becomes clear that Noi.md portal massively favours this candidate. At the same time, the PAS candidate Maia Sandu is obviously disadvantaged, being presented in negative contexts, texts and photos, 53 times during this period. The portal's editorial policy is thus biased, with some news being tendentious, often from a single source of information, and the allegations brought against some candidates and potential candidates are not balanced with the opinions/positions of the persons concerned.

Context of candidate presentations

■ Favoured ■ Disfavoured

Candidate	Favoured	Disfavoured
Andrei Nastase	4	9
Andrian Candu	0	5
Dorin Chirtoacă	0	5
Igor Dodon	116	0
Maia Sandu	0	53
Octavian Țîcu	0	0
Renato Usatîi	0	13
Tudor Deliu	0	9
Violeta Ivanov	0	5

Realitatea.md

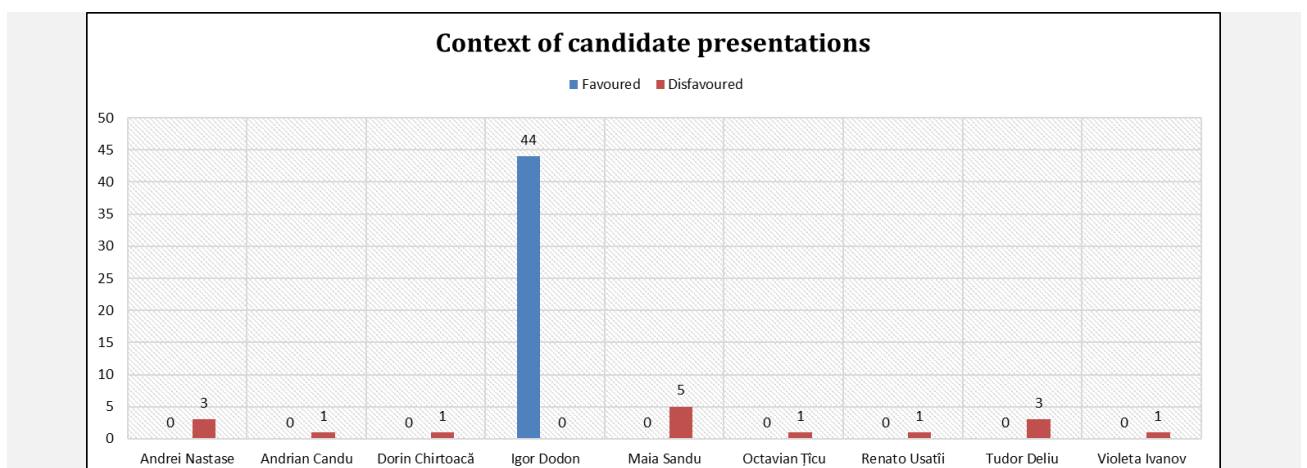During the reporting period, Realitatea.md portal presented the candidates and potential candidates for the position of president both neutrally and positively or negatively. Hence, the independent candidate supported by PSRM Igor Dodon was targeted 33 times in a context that disadvantaged him and, in other 25 cases, the stories published were favourable to him. The PAS candidate was targeted more often in items that favoured her, and so was the candidate of the "Șor" Party Violeta Ivanov. As concerns V. Ivanov, the portal published a number of detailed promotional stories with an obvious advertising character but which were not marked accordingly.
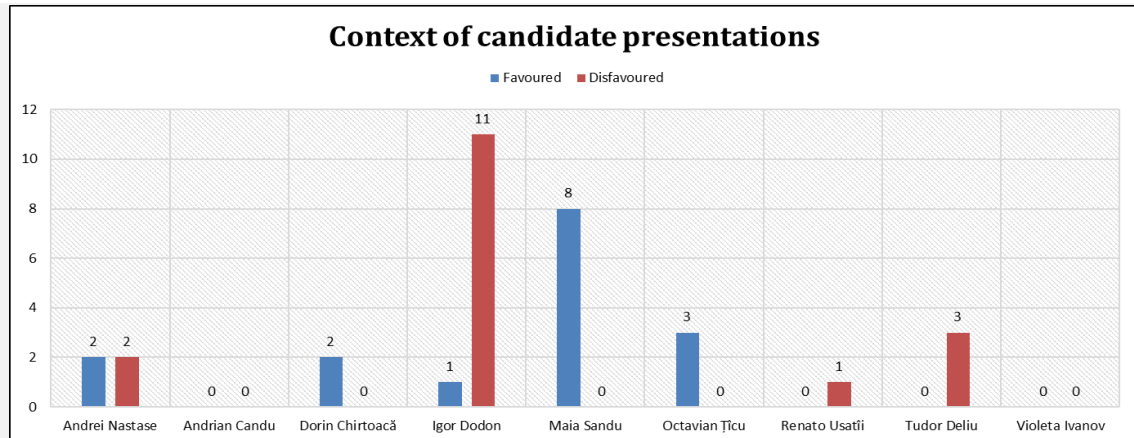
Context of candidate presentations

■ Favoured ■ Disfavoured

Candidate	Favoured	Disfavoured
Andrei Nastase	6	1
Andrian Candu	3	0
Dorin Chirtoacă	1	0
Igor Dodon	25	33
Maia Sandu	16	2
Octavian Țicu	0	0
Renato Usatîi	2	0
Tudor Deliu	2	2
Violeta Ivanov	13	1
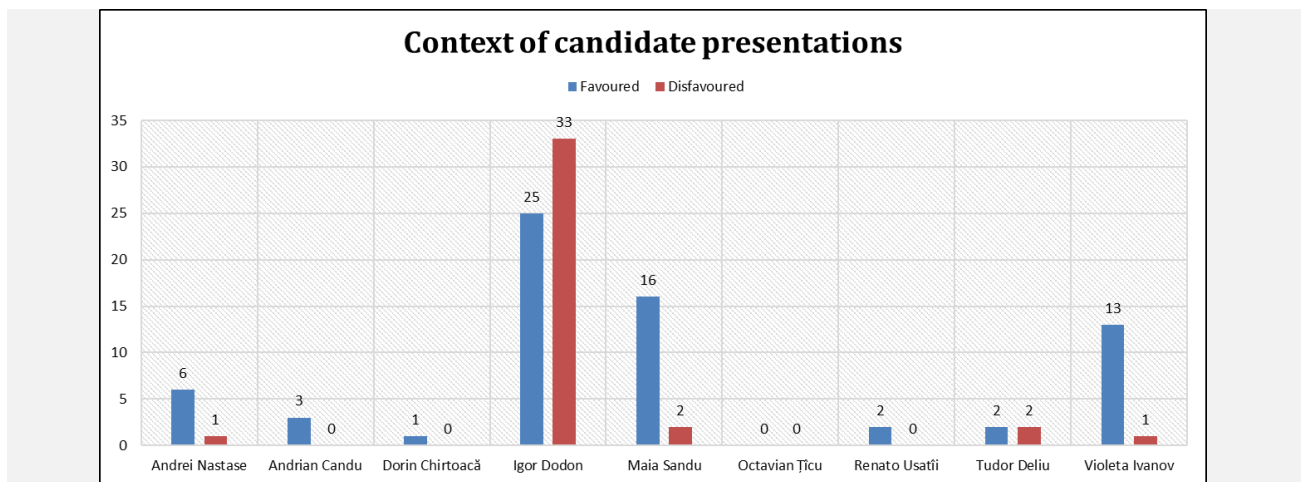
Sputnik.md

By the tone, frequency and context of the candidates' presentation, one can say that Sputnik.md portal favours the independent candidate supported by PSRM Igor Dodon. Dodon thus appeared in a positive context in 44 news items. PAS candidate Maia Sandu, but also Andrei Năstase, PPDA candidate and Tudor Deliu, PLDM candidate, are presented more rarely, in neutral but also in negative contexts.

Context of candidate presentations

■ Favoured ■ Disfavoured

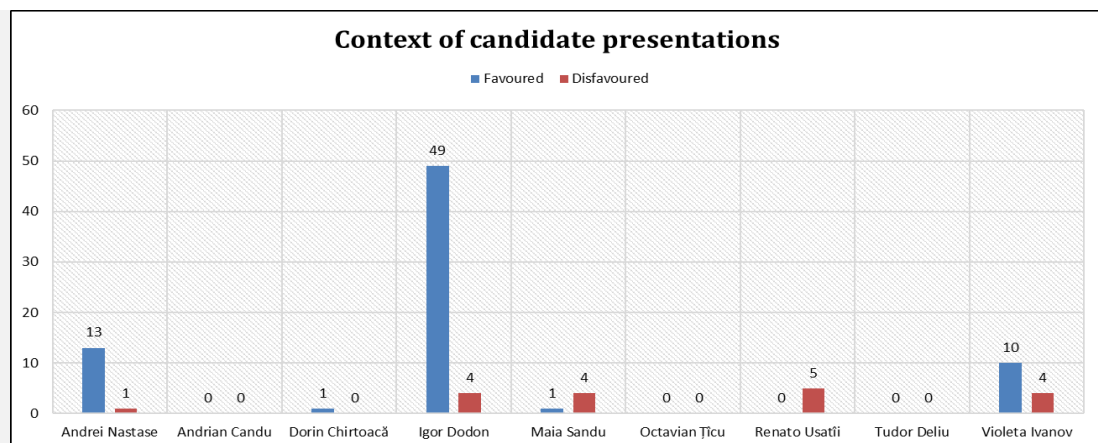| Candidate	Favoured	Disfavoured
Andrei Nastase	0	3
Andrian Candu	0	1
Dorin Chirtoacă	0	1
Igor Dodon	44	0
Maia Sandu	0	5
Octavian Țicu	0	1
Renato Usatîi	0	1
Tudor Deliu	0	3
Violeta Ivanov	0	1

Timpul.md

The absolute majority of the items published by Timpul.md that concerned the independent candidate supported by PSRM Igor Dodon (11 out of 12 cases), presented him in a negative context, disadvantaging him. PAS candidate Maia Sandu, on the contrary, was more often favoured (8 cases), and so was PUN candidate Octavian Țâcu (3 cases).

Context of candidate presentations

Favoured ■ Disfavoured

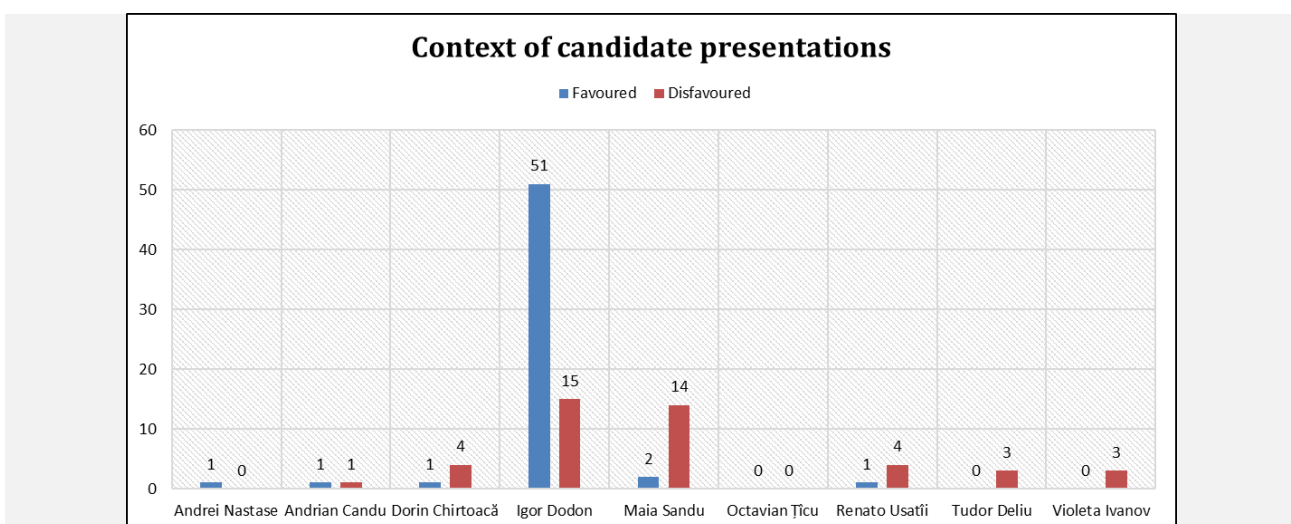| Candidate	Favoured	Disfavoured
Andrei Nastase	2	2
Andrian Candu	0	0
Dorin Chirtoacă	2	0
Igor Dodon	1	11
Maia Sandu	8	0
Octavian Țîcu	3	0
Renato Usatîi	0	1
Tudor Deliu	0	3
Violeta Ivanov	0	0

Unimedia.info

By the tone and frequency of positive presentations, Unimedia.info favours the independent candidate supported by PSRM Igor Dodon. His weekly show "The President Replies" was broadcast live and the video was attached; after each show, news stories and updates were made with statements that usually presented Igor Dodon in a positive context. The abundance of positive news about Ion Ceban, including entire galleries of photos taken over from the Mayor's Facebook page, always showing him in action, also 'works' to improve the public image of PSRM mouthpieces and, implicitly, of the candidate Igor Dodon.

PPDA candidate Andrei Nastase also often appeared in a positive context. Similarly, the candidate of the "Șor Party" Violeta Ivanov appeared in a positive context in a member of items with obvious advertising character but which were not marked accordingly, being disguised as news in the Political and Social sections.

Context of candidate presentations

Favoured ■ Disfavoured

Candidate	Favoured	Disfavoured
Andrei Nastase	13	1
Andrian Candu	0	0
Dorin Chirtoacă	1	0
Igor Dodon	49	4
Maia Sandu	1	4
Octavian Țîcu	0	0
Renato Usatîi	0	5
Tudor Deliu	0	0
Violeta Ivanov	10	4

Vedomosti.md

By the tone and frequency of the candidates' presentation, Vedomosti.md editorially favours the independent candidate supported by PSRM Igor Dodon who appears in different contexts, but mostly – in positive ones (51 cases, versus 15 presentations in negative contexts). Dodon thus appeared in stories about his social statements and initiatives, being praised by mayors and some experts, etc.

PAS candidate Maia Sandu, on the contrary, was disadvantaged by frequent presentation (14 cases) in negative contexts, being the target of harsh assaults by the portal's newsrooms, presented in offensive photo collages, criticized by various analysts, accused of not thinking about the pensioners when she was prime minister, accused of 'cutting schools live' (September 18), of 'castrating' education when she was minister, of failing to take care of modernizing the sanitation facilities in schools (intertitle: "А ведь убрать сортиры могла министр Майя Санду..." ("The toilets could have been cleaned by Minister Maia Sandu…", 23 September).

Context of candidate presentations

■ Favoured ■ Disfavoured

Candidate	Favoured	Disfavoured
Andrei Nastase	1	0
Andrian Candu	1	1
Dorin Chirtoacă	1	4
Igor Dodon	51	15
Maia Sandu	2	14
Octavian Țîcu	0	0
Renato Usatîi	1	4
Tudor Deliu	0	3
Violeta Ivanov	0	3

Full report in Romanian