



# MONITORING REPORT



Activity of media outlets and journalists on Facebook during the parliamentary by-election campaign in Electoral District 38, Hincesti Municipality

MARCH 9-22, 2020



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# Introduction and context

*This report presents how the parliamentary by-election in Hincesti was covered by Moldovan journalists (n=15) and media outlets (n=5) in their posts on the social network Facebook between March 9 and 22, 2020.*

**This study was conceptualized theoretically and tested empirically in the following context.**

- In the digital age, social networks are indispensable tools for accessing and communicating information for journalists and media outlets.
- The social networking platform Facebook is an important channel for the consumption and circulation of information for about one million Moldovans (Gramatic, 2019).
- During electoral campaigns, journalists pay special attention to political discourse and to candidates.
- As a platform for free expression and for social and political participation, the role of Facebook grows during electoral campaigns.
- Activity on social networks is protected by the right to freedom of expression (guaranteed by the Constitution of Moldova), but due to their affiliation with the journalistic community and with their media outlets, journalists are perceived as public persons invested with social responsibility whenever they promote public messages.
- Experience during previous elections in Moldova has shown that social networks are often used as tools for disseminating disinformation and political propaganda.

## PILOT STUDY

This study was first done on a test sample focusing on both analyzing journalists' behavior and, on the content, they created and shared online. An innovative research methodology adapted to the specifics of social networking was used.

The relevance of this topic has been confirmed by the number of studies on related issues carried out by media researchers in other European countries. The recommendations resulting from this monitoring study can help to better define the status of social networks in the Journalist's Code of Ethics of Moldova.



# Goal and objectives

*This investigation of how social networks are used by the journalistic community for professional purposes is not the first of its kind, but it is a topic that still has not been fully explored in Moldovan virtual space.*

## GOAL

This study aimed to analyze the work of 15 journalists and 5 media outlets and the content they posted on the Facebook network between March 9 and 22, 2020 to determine how they covered the parliamentary by-election in Hincesti (on March 15, 2020) and to assess whether they complied with the provisions of the Moldovan Journalist's Code of Ethics (Article 18) that condemn political partisanship, political and ideological propaganda, and electoral campaigning.



Since this study is the first of its kind in Moldova, additional goals were to familiarize the local public with its methodological approach, to start a broader discussion on how journalists use social networks, and to ascertain whether the Journalist's Code of Ethics can be adjusted to include specifics for digital media.

## OBJECTIVES

- To assess how journalists and media outlets used Facebook to inform the public about the political and electoral discourse of electoral competitors by systematically collecting open source data published on Facebook accounts and pages.
- To assess the activity of journalists and media outlets from the perspective of compliance with the Journalist's Code of Ethics by analyzing posts on their Facebook pages to determine whether they were neutral or revealed a political affiliation.

# Methodology

*This study used a methodology adapted to digital media that consists of a set of mixed digital methods through which data were sorted and analyzed.*

## SAMPLE

Between March 9 and 22, 2020, we monitored the activity of 15 journalists\* on their personal Facebook pages as well as that on the official pages of the 5 media outlets they worked for (Table 1) to identify and code their public posts related to the parliamentary by-election in Hincesti.

5

official Facebook pages of media outlets

15

personal Facebook accounts of journalists

106

posts about the parliamentary by-election in Hincesti

## CRITERIA

- Coverage – national
- Language diversity
- Audience and popularity
- Number of followers

- Prominence and influence in the public space
- Experience in journalism
- Audience and popularity
- Number of friends, followers

- Electoral nature
- Public status
- Importance of the information for the public
- Information shared during study timeline

**MEDIA OUTLETS: TV8 \* SPUTNIK MD \* JURNAL TV \* PUBLIKA \* NTV MOLDOVA**

\*The sample included seven women and eight men whose names were coded. In addition, to maintain the complete anonymity of the participants, the masculine form of the word journalist was used.

*Table 1: Facebook Pages of Media Outlets Monitored*

Name of outlet on Facebook	in the study	Facebook page / LINK
NTV Moldova	NTV	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/ntvmoldova/">https://www.facebook.com/ntvmoldova/</a>
TV8.MD	TV8	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/tv8moldova/">https://www.facebook.com/tv8moldova/</a>
PUBLIKA.MD	Publika	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/Publika.md/">https://www.facebook.com/Publika.md/</a>
Radio Sputnik Moldova	Sputnik	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/radiosputnikmoldova/">https://www.facebook.com/radiosputnikmoldova/</a>
Jurnal TV	Jurnal TV	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/jurnaltv/">https://www.facebook.com/jurnaltv/</a>

Note: Sputnik.md has three Facebook pages: Sputnik Moldova-Romania, Sputnik Moldova, and Radio Sputnik Moldova. During the monitoring period, we found that only Radio Sputnik Moldova had posts related to the by-election, so we chose this page for the study.



## FACEBOOK

In order to avoid conflicts and violations of ethics, we collected only public data from the POSTS category during the study timeline. As Figure 1 indicates, public information is addressed to the general public and is published on social networks without restrictions and without a privacy filter. Such posts technically have the possibility to reach large groups of people, and their authors usually aim to influence public opinion in one way or another.



- Data were collected from the activity feeds the day after the posts were made; when additional videos or photos were posted, they were not coded.
- Data analysis was performed based on the quantitative content analysis method. It consists of a statistical analysis of media content using the SPSS (IBM) program to detect general trends in a number of media elements. In addition, we made case studies to analyze prominent trends in terms of quality.
- We analyzed posts visible during the study timeline before readers were redirected to a platform other than Facebook (i.e. without accessing links).
- The study was conducted in the full awareness that the posts that appeared on Facebook did not represent the entire media content produced by the media outlets either during the monitoring period or in general.

## PARLIAMENTARY BY-ELECTION

The parliamentary by-election in Electoral District 38 Hincesti was organized after the resignation of Alexandru Botnari who was elected to Parliament on February 24, 2019 representing the Democratic Party of Moldova. Mr. Botnari resigned after deciding to take the position of Mayor of Hincesti, to which he was re-elected on November 3, 2019 for a fifth consecutive term. The electoral campaign began on February 14, 2020, with the participation of eight candidates for the seat. Eventually, only five candidates remained in the competition.

This by-election was important from the perspective of the upcoming presidential election in the autumn of 2020 and because it happened during a Code Red in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic.

# Main trends

- All five media outlets monitored covered the parliamentary by-election to either a lesser or a greater extent.
- The outlets and journalists monitored can be divided into two categories: active (covering various social and political aspects of the by-election and all parties involved) and passive (covering events selectively in news stories about the by-election).
- TV8 and Jurnal TV were quite active on Facebook in the context of the by-election and used the network to inform the public, to promote their outlets, and to share their own news stories or those of teammates. Sputnik Moldova, Publika, and NTV Moldova covered the by-election sporadically and superficially.
- The dynamics of journalists' posts covering the by-election were similar to those of their media outlets.
- None of the journalists or media outlets urged people to vote during the monitoring period. One reason might be the short duration of the campaign with only one seat up for election. Another reason could be that the election took place during the pandemic and was thus overshadowed.
- In all, 40% of the journalists used their personal Facebook accounts to inform readers about the by-election but did not openly support any of the candidates or political entities competing.
- COVID-19 influenced the manner in which the election was covered in the media, but not all outlets or journalists covered this topic in their posts on Facebook.
- We found the following violations of the Journalist's Code of Ethics on media outlet Facebook pages:
  - (1) The posts on the NTV Moldova page clearly showed support for the candidates of the Party of Socialists (PSRM) in violation of Article 1.8 of the Journalist's Code of Ethics which refers to political partisanship.
  - (2) The COMMENTS section on the Jurnal TV page showed evidence of trolling in accounts with hidden or false identities. That contradicts Article 2.40 of the Journalist's Code of Ethics that states, "Media outlets shall administer their websites and pages on social networks in a way that does not allow or accept violations of legal standards and rules of conduct in their public's reactions (comments)."

# Major topics

Between March 9 and 22, 2020, there were several events of an electoral nature covered by media outlets and journalists in various ways that often-revealed editorial preferences (Figures 2.1 - 2.4).

1

- Trips organized by the Shor Party for voters were reported only by NTV Moldova which referred to an investigation with a questionable source on the website scheme.md (March 9, 2020). **2 POSTS**
- Organized transportation for voters to polling stations (March 15, 2020, TV8 and Jurnal TV). **4 POSTS**

Figure 2.1: Overall quantitative analysis of posts made by media outlets about possible violations before and during the elections

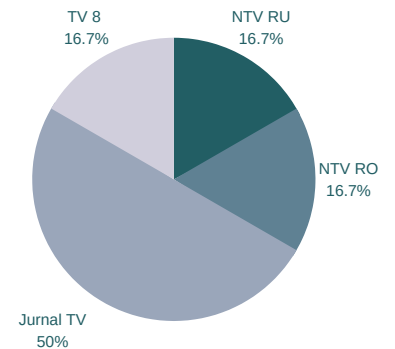
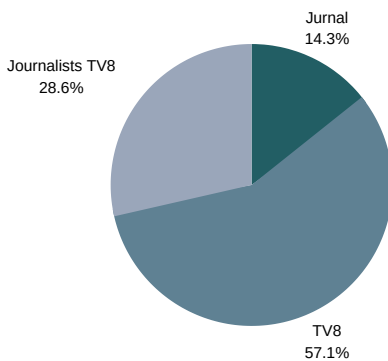


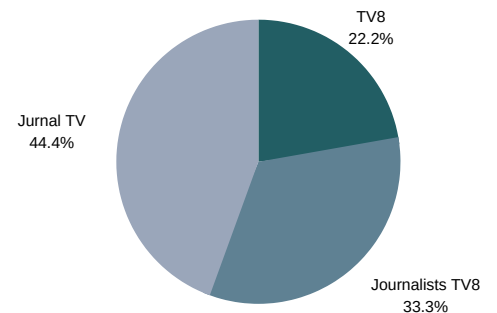
Figure 2.2: Overall quantitative analysis of posts made by media outlets and their journalists about a candidate exclusion



Exclusion from the race of Shor Party candidate Vitalie Balinschi for allegedly corrupting voters and the protest of his supporters at the Court of Appeals (March 10, 2020). **7 POSTS**

2

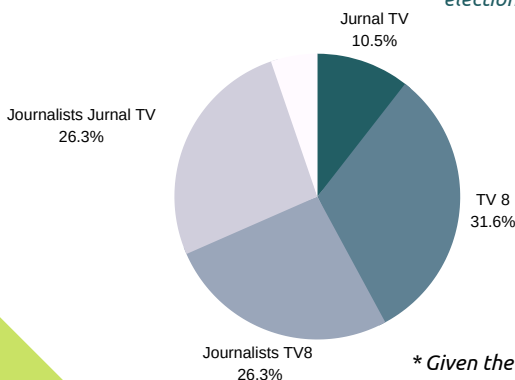
Figure 2.3: Overall quantitative analysis of posts made by media outlets and their journalists about electoral debates



3

Electoral debates organized by Jurnal TV (March 11, 2020) and TV8 (March 12, 2020) held without Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM) and PSRM representatives. NTV, Publika.md and Sputnik Moldova did not organize debates. **12 POSTS**

Figure 2.4: Overall quantitative analysis of posts made by media outlets and their journalists about potential election' postponement

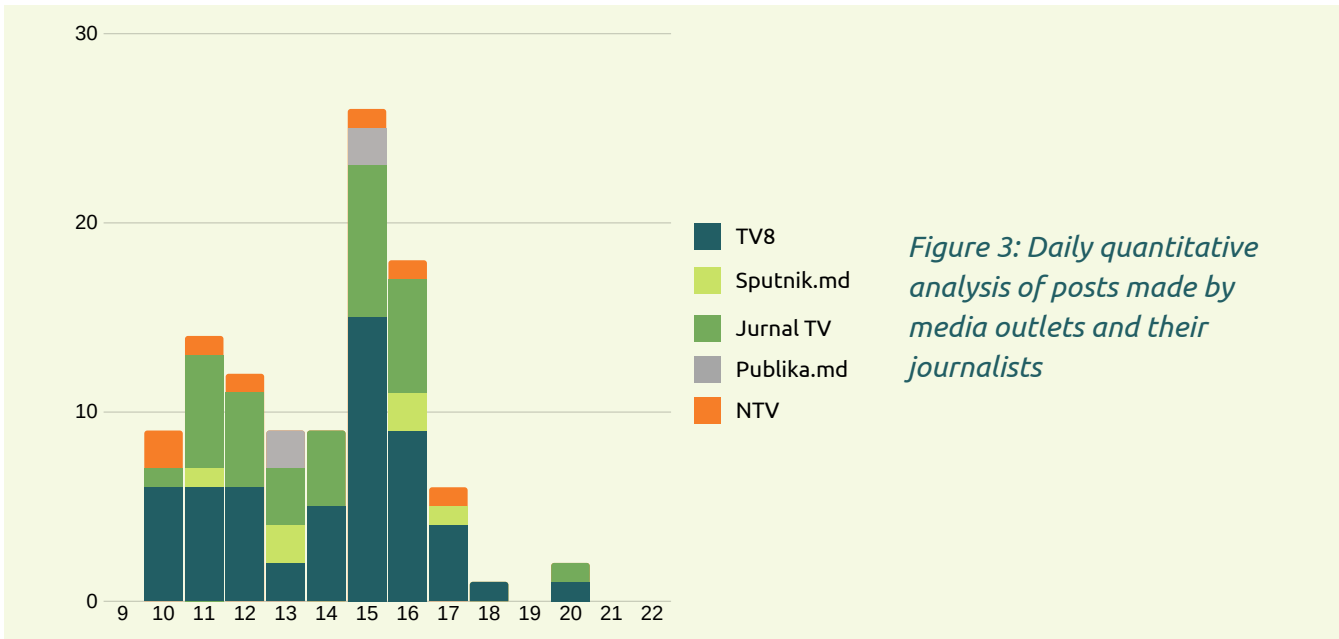


Call to postpone the parliamentary by-election because of the nationwide Code Red alert due to the deteriorating epidemiological situation caused by COVID-19. Various politicians and journalists actively supported it on social networks. **18 POSTS**

4

\* Given the impact it had on society in Moldova and around the world, COVID-19 put the parliamentary by-election in the background, so we examined this issue in the report as well. Assessing the impact of the election on public health is not the purpose of this study.

# Dynamics of posts



An analysis of the overall number of posts by media outlets and their journalists shows the most were on March 11, 15 and 16 (Figure 3). The posts on March 11 highlighted news about the protests at the Central Electoral Commission organized by Shor Party supporters and criticism of its organizers for irresponsibly ignoring the Code Red. Also on that day, electoral debates were held on Jurnal TV, and TV8 announced debates would be held. The election day (March 15) was covered in 26 posts out of the total of 106, i.e. about a quarter of all posts (24.5%), followed by the day after the elections with 18 posts.

## JOURNALISTS

Of the 106 posts monitored, 74 were by media outlets and 32 were by their journalists. The largest number was made by journalists at TV8 (62.5%), followed by those at Jurnal TV (31.25%). The journalists at Publika did not post anything about the by-election.

About half of the posts (46.8%) were made between March 15 and 16, 93.75% of which criticized politicians and state institutions for organizing elections without regard for the risks to voters of COVID-19. In that context, 37.5% of posts mentioned that elections should have been postponed.

## MEDIA OUTLETS

Posts by the media outlets about the by-election were more evenly distributed than those of the journalists. TV8 and Jurnal TV had the most during the monitoring period at 47.29% and 32.43%, respectively, while NTV Moldova posted 8.10%, Sputnik 6.75%, and Publika 5.4%. The peak was on election day on March 15 when 27% of the posts appeared (Fig.4)

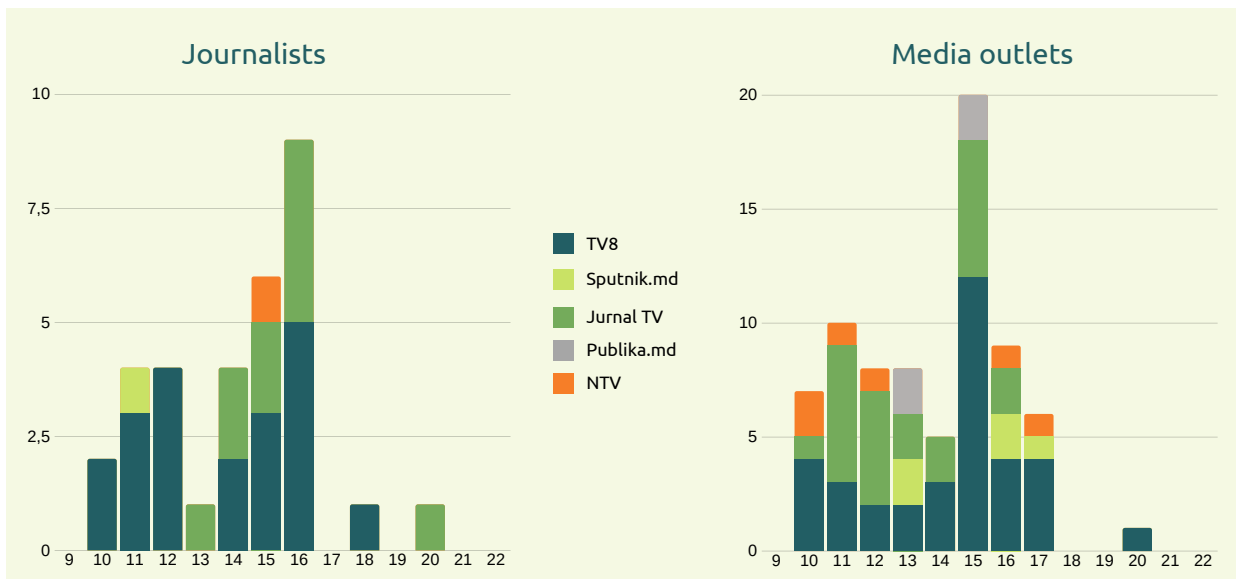


Figure 4: Daily quantitative posts by media outlet and journalists

# Interactions with posts

An important aspect in the analysis of Facebook posts is the way the public interacts with them as shown in both their comments and reactions, e.g., like, love, haha, wow, sad, or angry. Because comments are made in response to the content of posts, the number of reactions can be directly interpreted as support for/disagreement with/criticism of the information, while the number of times a post is shared would indicate its relative importance to the reader. In one way or another, the level of interaction shows how broad and active the community of an outlet or a journalist is and how valuable the information they share on their Facebook pages is to that community.

## REACTIONS

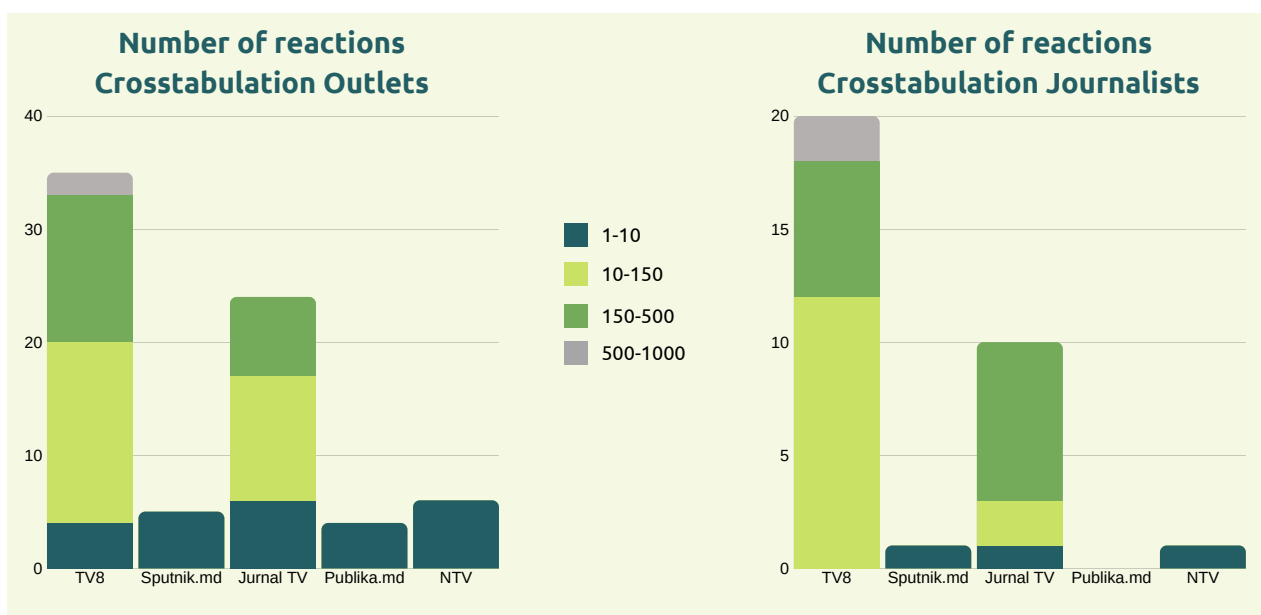


Figure 5: Reactions to posts of journalists and outlets

As Figure 5 shows, all posts by media outlets received reactions from users, but TV8 was the only outlet with more than 500 (5.71% of all posts by TV8). About half of the posts by TV8 (45.7%) and by Jurnal TV (45.8%) got between 10 and 150 reactions while over one third of posts by TV8 (37.14%) and 29.16% of posts by Jurnal TV got between 150 and 500 reactions. Sputnik (6,463 followers), Publika (183,868 followers), and NTV Moldova (72,650 followers) averaged under 10 reactions per post. At the time of coding, the pages of TV8 and Jurnal TV had the largest number of followers at 221,546 and 200,521 respectively.

The dynamics of reactions to journalists' posts were similar to those of the media outlets they represent, i.e., they posted either very rarely (Publika, Sputnik, and NTV Moldova), or very often (Jurnal TV and TV8). This fact directly influenced the activity of their followers/online friends. According to Facebook's algorithms, users who actively and systematically post and interact in comments are more likely to reach the feeds of users who follow them and interact with them.

## COMMENTS

The COMMENTS section is the public space for users to express themselves freely; a user's decision to interact with a post depends on the "popularity" of the outlet/journalist and on the content. With 37.14% of its posts getting 100 to 200 comments, TV8 was the outlet with the most comments and also had the largest number of posts. In all, 37.5% of the posts by Jurnal TV had between 10 and 50 comments, but during the monitoring period it had the largest number of comments from suspicious accounts. Journalists' posts followed the same trend: 50% of the posts made by journalists from TV8 and Jurnal TV had between 10 and 50 comments, and 15% of those by TV8 journalists had between 50 and 100 comments. NTV Moldova had between 0 and 10 comments for 50% of its posts (which is 8% of the total number). Publika got no comments on its posts or on the posts of its journalists (Figure 6).

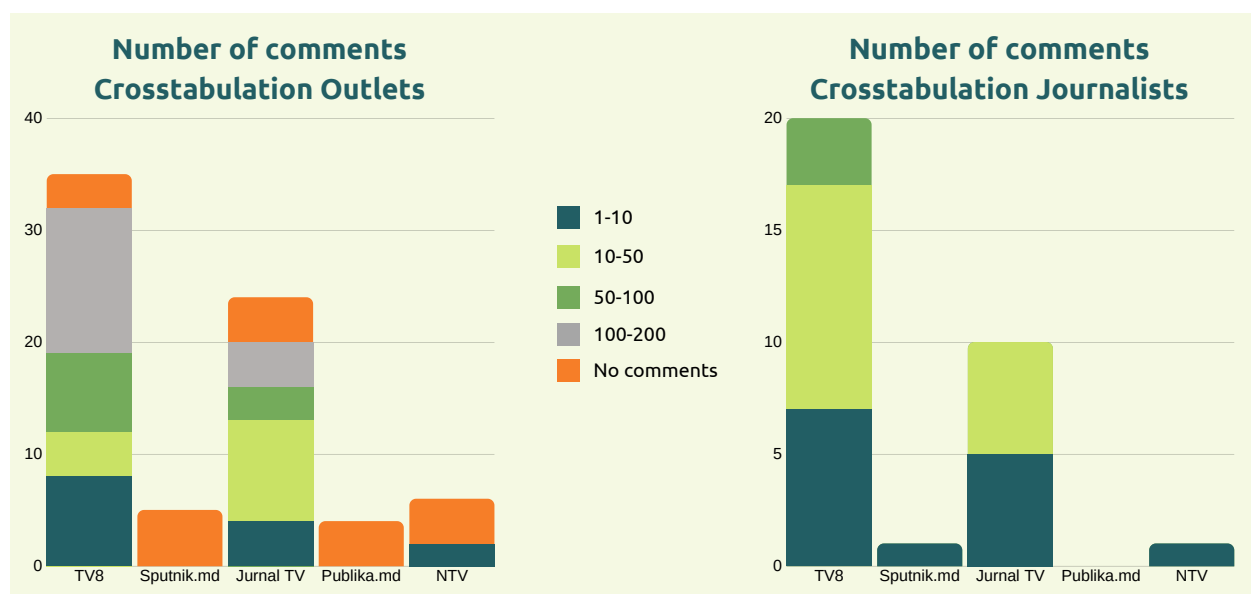


Figure 6: Number of comments on posts by outlets and journalists

# Article 1.8

## Compliance with the Journalist's Code of Ethics

One of this study's objectives was to assess how the journalists and media outlets monitored complied with the **Journalist's Code of Ethics (Article 1.8)** when they referred to electoral events. Article 1.8 condemns the following:

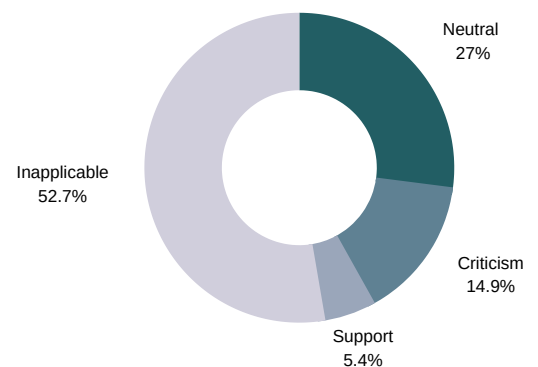
- "Any attempts to involve journalists in activities of **political partisanship**, of an ideologically or financially mercenary nature, in **propaganda wars**, or in **information wars characterized by trolling**;
- The dissemination of messages prohibited by law (hate speech, homophobia, anti-Semitism, discrimination, etc.), as well as ideological, religious, or **political propaganda; electoral campaigning**; or commercial advertising."

The attitude towards a candidate in a parliamentary election expressed in posts on Facebook can either confirm or refute the affiliation of journalists and media outlets with certain parties or politicians. Therefore, this indicator was used to assess the accuracy and impartiality of the journalists covering the candidates.

## MEDIA OUTLETS

In more than half of the posts made by media outlets on their pages, we detected no attitudes directly favoring any electoral candidate. In the majority of posts (52.7%), no candidate was cited directly. In about a quarter (27%) of all posts, media outlets approached the respective politicians impartially and neutrally. Eleven posts (14.9%) contained criticism of politicians, and four (5.4%) showed support for a single candidate.

Figure 7: Attitude to candidates in posts by media outlets



NTV Moldova favored PSRM candidate Stefan Gatcan who actually won the by-election. The posts in the images below praise the campaign successes of the PSRM, e.g., "Over 100 meetings with 30,000 voters in 25 localities," and emphasized the fact that the PSRM is the largest party in Parliament and that Gatcan's victory further strengthened its standing.



NTV Moldova also praised Gatcan and ascribed popularity to him, calling him "the well-known doctor." By qualifying his experience and professionalism as "very useful," NTV represented him as indispensable in Parliament during the pandemic.



Jurnal TV, on the other hand, was the only media outlet that posted the news on its Facebook page that Stefan Gatcan was allegedly involved in a sex scandal. Although the candidate's opinion was also presented and he was offered the right to reply, this post can be qualified as an attempt to harm his image on the social network.

Some media outlets provided candidates with space in posts selectively. Table 2 shows that TV8 ensured the greatest diversity of political opinions during the campaign while generally maintaining a neutral (non-partisan) attitude towards the candidates but still criticizing the representative of the Shor Party (especially for the protest organized during the pandemic) and Igor Dodon (for not canceling the by-election). Jurnal TV showed similar dynamics; however, it avoided directly citing the representatives of the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) and Dorin Chirtoarca (of the Unirea Electoral Bloc). Sputnik exclusively cited Stefan Gatcan while maintaining a neutral attitude, and Publika briefly announced that Shor Party candidate Vitalie Balinschi had withdrawn from the race.

The candidates who participated in the debates held on TV8 and Jurnal TV are in a special category as these posts concerned Olesea Stamate (PAS), Dorin Chirtoaca (Unirea), and Grigore Cobzac (independent candidate) as a group. The narrative promoted in them was that Grigore Cobzac should have withdrawn in favor of the PAS candidate.

**Table 2: Attitude \* Media outlets \* Politicians cited Crosstabulation**

Count			Media outlets					
Politicians cited			TV8	Sputnik	Jurnal TV	Publika	NTV	Total
Vitalie Balinschi (Shor Party)	Attitude	Critical	4		1	1	1	7
	Total		4		1	1	1	7
Ilan Shor (Shor Party)	Attitude	Neutral / impartial	2					2
	Total		2					2
Stefan Gatcan (PSRM)	Attitude	Neutral / impartial	3	3	2		0	8
		Critical	0	0	1		0	1
		Supportive	0	0	0		4	4
	Total		3	3	3		4	13
Igor Dodon (PSRM)	Attitude	Critical	2					2
	Total		2					2
Olesea Stamate (PAS)	Attitude	Neutral / impartial	1					1
	Total		1					1
Maia Sandu (PAS)	Attitude	Neutral / impartial	1					1
	Total		1					1
Dorin Chirtoaca (Unirea)	Attitude	Neutral / impartial	1					1
	Total		1					1
Ion Mereuta (PDM)	Attitude	Neutral / impartial			1			1
		Critical			1			1
	Total				2			2
Candidates at electoral debates	Attitude	Neutral / impartial	2		4			6
	Total		2		4			6
Inapplicable	Attitude	No politicians are cited	19	2	14	3	1	39
	Total		19	2	14	3	1	39
Total	Attitude	Neutral / impartial	14	3	8	1	1	27
		Critical	2	0	2	0	0	4
		Supportive	0	0	0	0	4	4
	Total	No politicians are cited	19	2	14	3	1	39
Total		35	5	24	4	6	74	

In conclusion, from the data collected and analyzed we can deduce that NTV Moldova engaged in direct political partisanship for the PSRM candidate and that Sputnik also contributed to making a positive image for him by referring exclusively to him, albeit in an impartial manner. Publika maintained silence about the candidates except for the candidate of the Shor Party whose withdrawal from the contest was mentioned. This strategy can be interpreted as an attempt to avoid contributing to the visibility of the other candidates because any type of media coverage during a campaign contributes to the recognition of a political entity.

## JOURNALISTS

The majority of the 32 posts by journalists (56.3%) did not mention a candidate directly (Inapplicable) while 34.4% criticized politicians and 9.4% were neutral in posts that mentioned political actors. No journalists showcased a positive attitude towards the politicians engaged in the electoral process. Thus, there was general compliance with Article 1.8.

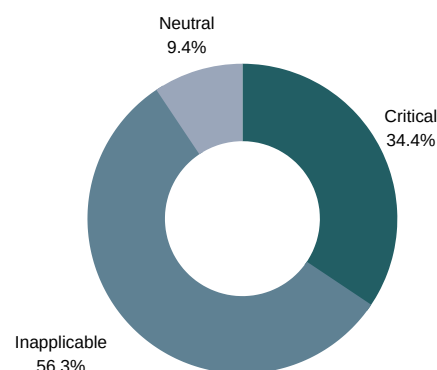


Figure 8: Attitude to candidates expressed in posts by journalists

Most of the criticism was for holding the by-election during the COVID-19 pandemic and its potential effect on public health. Table 3 shows that most posts were made by journalists from TV8 and Jurnal TV and that they complemented each other with regard to criticism of the candidates. In the few posts by journalists representing Sputnik and NTV we found none that mentioned any candidate, and journalists from Publika did not post on this topic so were not included in Table 3.

TV8 journalists criticized the following:

- Balinschi and the Shor Party leader for holding the protest at the Central Electoral Commission during the pandemic thus jeopardizing the lives of people;
- President Dodon for inaction because he did not cancel the by-election and for his politically motivated explanations;
- PSRM candidate Gatcan for his attempt to take advantage of the situation in the Village of Balceana (where the first death caused by COVID-19 was registered at that time) by delivering masks and disinfectant (which, according to the journalist, were not provided by the authorities).

TV8 journalists announced their electoral debate with the participation of three out of the five candidates in a neutral manner.

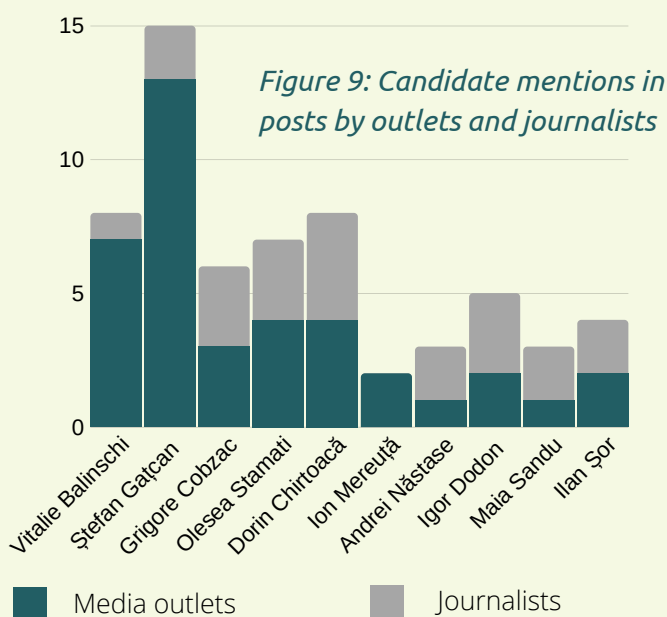
Count		Journalists					
Politicians cited		TV8	Sputnik.md	Jurnal TV	NTV	Total	
Vitalie Balinschi (Shor Party)	Attitude	Critical	1				1
	Total		1				1
Ilan Shor (Shor Party)	Attitude	Critical	2				2
	Total		2				2
Stefan Gatcan (PSRM)	Attitude	Critical	2				2
	Total		2				2
Igor Dodon (PSRM)	Attitude	Critical	1		2		3
	Total		1		2		3
Dorin Chirtoaca (Unirea)	Attitude	Critical			1		1
	Total				1		1
Grigore Cobzac (independent candidate)	Attitude	Critical			1		1
	Total				1		1
Maia Sandu (PAS) and Andrei Nastase (PPDA)	Attitude	Critical			1		1
		Inapplicable			2		2
	Total				3		3
Candidates at debates (Dorin Chirtoaca, Olesea Stamate, Grigore Cobzac)	Attitude	Neutral	3				3
	Total		3				3
Inapplicable (no politicians are mentioned)	Attitude	Inapplicable	11	1	3	1	16
	Total		11	1	3	1	16
Total	Attitude	Neutral	3	0	0	0	3
		Critical	6	0	5	0	11
		Inapplicable	11	1	5	1	18
	Total		20	1	10	1	32

In addition to harsh criticism of public authorities—particularly the country’s president—for conducting an election during the pandemic which, as one post said, qualified as a “crime,” Jurnal TV journalists criticized both the opposition and the independent candidates.

- Three posts urged the leaders of PAS and the Dignity and Truth Platform Party (PPDA) (Maia Sandu and Andrei Nastase, respectively) to encourage voters not to go to vote because of the risk of coronavirus and expressed disappointment because those two leaders did not do so. The post said they were arrogant and uncooperative because they had missed their chance to prove that, “They are strong characters. Rational and strong people (...)”.
- President Dodon was described as “hypocritical” and independent candidate Cobzac as “out of the game” when the outlet disseminated the message (from candidate Dorin Chirtoacă during the debate) that Cobzac should have withdrawn from the race in favor of the PAS candidate Oleseă Stamate. Although the post criticized only Cobzac and did not support any of his competitors, the fact that Oleseă Stamate of PAS was not mentioned in any hostile comments is indicative of an intention to support her.

In conclusion, the way journalists commented on the parliamentary by-election was largely determined by the actions/inactions of the candidates and their party leaders and by how they prioritized political interests over the pandemic. Although the journalists monitored did not directly support any candidate, quantitative content analyses showed a slight favoring of the PAS candidate through the presence of her image in general in neutral posts. A negative attitude toward the candidate and the authorities affiliated with the PSRM was persistently and clearly expressed by the representatives of both media outlets that posted during the monitoring period. Overall, TV8 and Jurnal TV journalists actively used Facebook during the campaign to highlight problems in the system and to interpret the political discourse for their public.

## VISIBILITY FOR POLITICIANS



Regardless of the attitudes in the Facebook posts of media outlets and of journalists towards the politicians involved in the parliamentary by-election, some candidates had greater visibility than others.

The PSRM candidate and winner Ștefan Gatcan was mentioned most often between March 9 and 22. He thus clearly had an advantage compared with the other competitors in terms of space provided and the visibility it afforded him (Figure 9).

# Coronavirus *“Election despite the pandemic” (JurnalTV)*

The by-election in Hincesti was overshadowed by the spread of COVID-19 in Moldova and underwent organizational changes as a result. Postponing the election was a topic of discussion in that context.

Out of the overall total of 106 posts coded between March 9 and 22, about one third (34.9%) mentioned COVID-19 in connection with the election on March 15 generally referring to the fact that holding it during the pandemic was a danger to society though a smaller group ignored or even underplayed the negative impact it might have. Most of the posts (65.1%) ignored the pandemic (Figure 10). Journalists at TV8 and Jurnal TV were the most active in sharing their opinions about the by-election in the context of COVID-19.

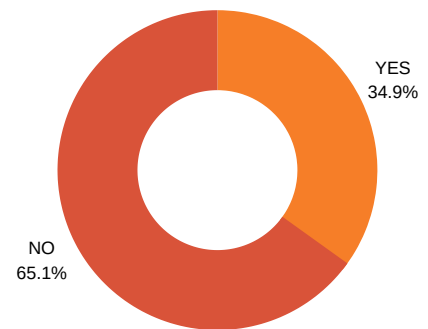


Figure 10: Percentage of posts that did or did not mention COVID-19

## MEDIA OUTLETS

Of the 74 posts by media outlets about the by-election on Facebook between March 9 and 22, fewer than one quarter (20.3%) mentioned COVID-19.

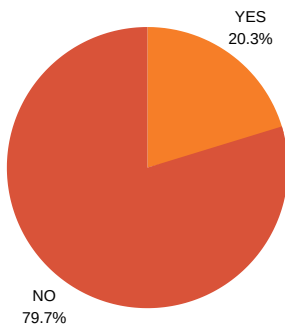


Figure 11: COVID-19 \* media outlets crosstabulation

		Instituții /Institutions					Total
		TV8	Sputnik.md	Jurnal TV	Publika.md	NTV	
COVID-19	DA /YES Count	9	1	4	1	0	15
	% of Total	12.2%	1.4%	5.4%	1.4%	0.0%	20.3%
NU /NO	Count	26	4	20	3	6	59
	% of Total	35.1%	5.4%	27.0%	4.1%	8.1%	79.7%
Total	Count	35	5	24	4	6	74
	% of Total	47.3%	6.8%	32.4%	5.4%	8.1%	100.0%

Figure 11 shows that TV8 mentioned the virus in 9 of its 35 posts, Jurnal TV in 4 of its 24, Sputnik in one post out of five, and Publika mentioned it in one of its four posts. NTV Moldova did not mention COVID-19 in its posts during this period. The main topics in TV8 and Jurnal TV posts were the failed attempt to cancel the by-election and the consequences of holding it during the Code Red. The posts by Publika and Sputnik focused on the fact that the authorities had taken sufficient measures to ensure the safe conduct of the by-election.

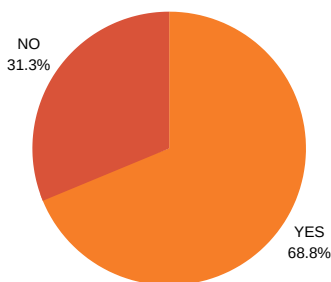


The few posts about the by-election in the context of the pandemic and their absence on the Facebook pages of some media outlets can be qualified as avoiding the presentation of any potential consequences of holding an election during the pandemic. The media outlets that did post focused mainly on the actions of the authorities to ensure the safety of the election.

## JOURNALISTS

Of the 32 posts by journalists between March 9 and 22, over two thirds (68.8%) referred to COVID-19. Most of them were by journalists from TV8 (15 posts) followed by journalists from Jurnal TV (5). Reporters from NTV and Sputnik made one post each, and those from Publika had no posts on this topic during the monitoring period (Figure 12).

Figure 11: COVID-19 \* media outlets crosstabulation



		Jurnaliști /Journalists				
		TV8	Sputnik.md	Jurnal TV	NTV	Total
COVID-19 mențione	DA/YES Count	15	1	5	1	22
	% of Total	46.9%	3.1%	15.6%	3.1%	68.8%
NU/NO Count	Count	5	0	5	0	10
	% of Total	15.6%	0.0%	15.6%	0.0%	31.3%
Total	Count	20	1	10	1	32
	% of Total	62.5%	3.1%	31.3%	3.1%	100.0%

TV8 and Jurnal TV journalists' posts were similar in tone:

- sarcastic comments and indignation about the protests of Shor Party supporters in the context of the high risk of coronavirus transmission given that the protesters were elderly people and calling the demonstration absurd;
- criticism of public authorities for “lack of courage” and political will to cancel the by-election so as not to expose voters to the danger of being infected with COVID-19;
- blaming the Central Electoral Commission and other political actors for the large number of people infected with COVID-19, focusing on the by-election in Hincesti.

The post made by journalists from NTV Moldova briefly presented the opinions of public institutions regarding the postponement of the by-election citing reasons why that was impossible and focusing on the preparations for the safe conduct of the event. The post made by a Sputnik journalist had ideological connotations as he compared the coronavirus with a “seasonal flu” which was allegedly less dangerous than “the virus of liberalism” alluding to Western capitalism and to people from the expat community.

# Disinformation and manipulation

**Conceptual insertions.** Conceptual insertions. The classical methods of disinformation and manipulation have proved to be compatible with the characteristics of digital media and social networks. In posts on Facebook by media outlets, disinformation and manipulation can be found in additional descriptions that sometimes consist of a short interpretation of the news or in a post with a direct citation from material shared. After the headline comes an information “cell” to catch the reader’s attention long enough to access and read/watch the material posted in its entirety. While descriptions of posts are controlled by the media outlet, comments and interactions are outside its control, offering a new dimension for information consumption. The technical option to comment that Facebook offers its users allows fake and politically affiliated accounts to infiltrate the conversation and to influence its course.

## MEDIA OUTLETS

Overall, the Facebook posts of the media outlets monitored complied with the principles of correctness for reporting information: separating facts from opinions and citing verified sources. When analyzing those posts, we paid special attention to any additional descriptions included with the material posted. We found four cases (out of 32) where posts contained disinformation and manipulation, either in the description or in the headline (Table 4).

Count					
			Correctness of information		
Media outlets			Complied with	Not complied with	Total
TV8	Description	YES	35		35
	Total		35		35
Sputnik.md	Description	YES	5		5
	Total		5		5
Jurnal TV	Description	YES	7	0	7
		NO	16	1	17
	Total		23	1	24
Publika.md	Description	YES	2	1	3
		NO	1	0	1
	Total		3	1	4
NTV	Description	YES	4	2	6
	Total		4	2	6
Total	Description	YES	53	3	56
		NO	17	1	18
	Total		70	4	74

YES - the post has a description, NO - the post has no description

As shown in the following screen shots, Sputnik exploited data, NTV Moldova referred to a suspicious source, Publika manipulated the headline indirectly calling voters to polling stations (claiming that the election would be “secure”), and Jurnal TV made a post that included a tendentious generalization.





**Sputnik, March 13, 2020**

**Manipulative description:** “Over 60,000 people are expected to vote on Sunday.” The description contains no reference to verifiable sources. There are also no quotation marks that would indicate that the information is in fact a statement by Iurie Ciocanu (former chairman of the Central Electoral Commission who appears in the photo).

**Sensationalist headline:** “Unprecedented measures – Here is what will happen at the by-election in Hincesti”. The headline can be seen as an attempt to increase voters’ confidence that the election will be held under safe conditions.

**NTV Moldova, March 10, 2020: Non-compliance with the presumption of innocence and reference to a suspicious source, i.e., scheme.md.**

“Representatives of the Shor Party have corrupted the Hincesti constituency with free trips and large meals. The journalists of scheme.md presented an investigation with both documents and video footage proving these illegalities (...).” In this case, NTV Moldova disregarded the presumption of innocence, a basic right in criminal justice and a basic human right (in this case of the Shor Party).



**Scheme.md** is a website that declares itself on its Facebook page to be a project launched in Moldova recently, “...designed by Moldovan journalists with the support of external partners. We investigate, analyze, write.” There are no contacts or details about the editorial team on the website. The content on the page is limited and generally includes articles about political actors and authorities allegedly involved in dubious schemes, according to authors. References to this source cast doubt on the rest of the material as well.



**Publika.md, March 15, 2020. Manipulative headline.**

**“SECURE ELECTION IN HINCESTI. Polling booths, pens, and stamps have been disinfected.”**

This post promotes a narrative favoring the central authorities and presents the election from the perspective of measures taken against COVID-19 inside polling stations. By appearing on the day of the election, this post and its headline could influence public opinion regarding the safety of voting.

**JurnalTV, March 15, 2020: Tendentious generalization.**

By using the word “traditionally,” the media outlet generalized the way in which protesters supporting the Shor Party came to Chisinau.





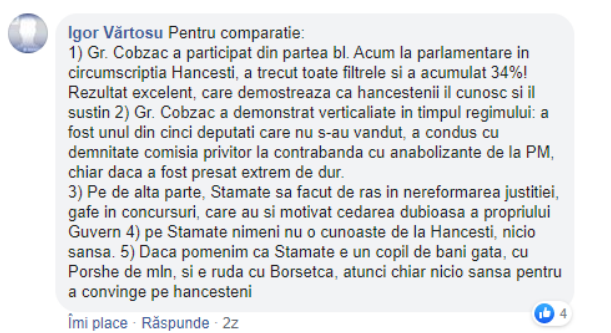
# POTENTIALLY FAKE ACCOUNTS ON JURNAL TV FACEBOOK PAGE

During the monitoring period, we identified several accounts with fake or hidden identities that exhibited trolling behavior in their comments on posts on the Facebook pages of media outlets. On the Jurnal TV page, these accounts started discussions under posts about the authorities' reaction to COVID-19 and attacked the representatives of the PAS and PSRM parties and the independent candidate Cobzac for not postponing the by-election because of the pandemic. The profiles have minimal information about the actual owners of these Facebook accounts. The security of privacy settings is high, meaning that no data are presented to indicate a real person. Profile pictures are abstract images. The comments are many, and they have an emotional load that is typical of fake accounts actively interacting with other platform users. It is evident that these accounts tried to keep communication active in the COMMENTS section and to channel the conversation into the desired direction. Some accounts are active in other groups on Facebook, too, maintaining the same level of participation. An analysis of two such accounts and their posts on the Facebook page of Jurnal TV follows.

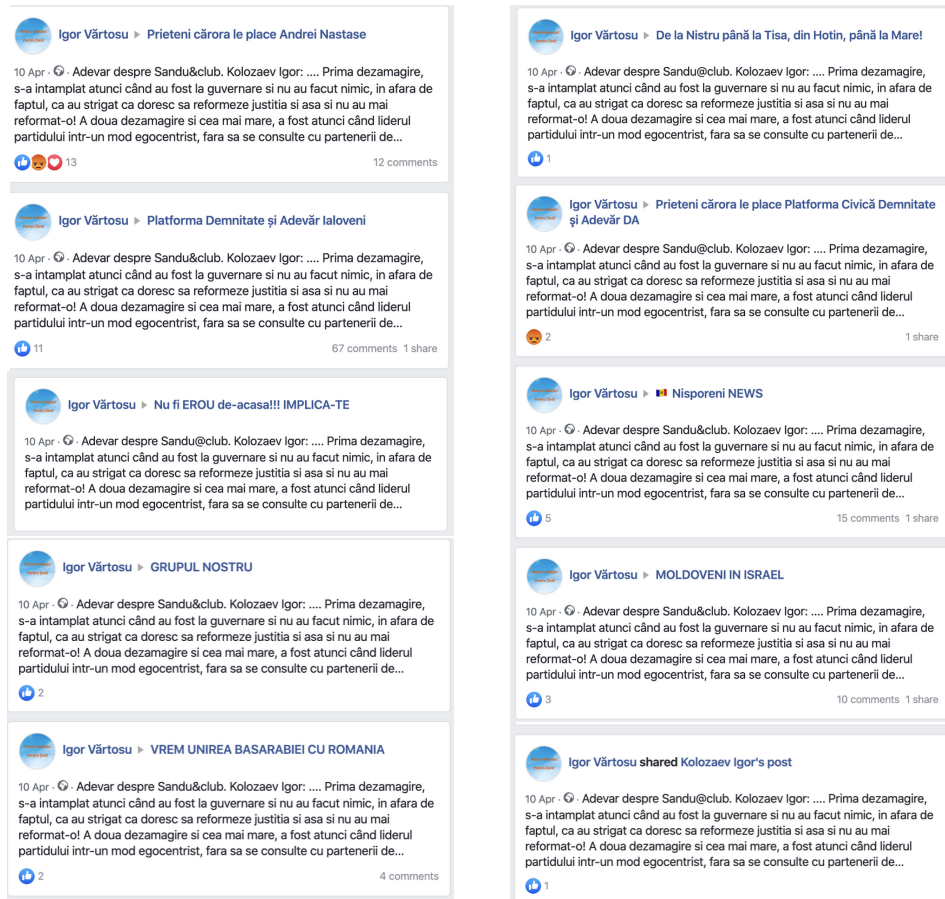
## 1. TROLL WITH HIDDEN IDENTITY, AFFILIATED WITH THE DIGNITY AND TRUTH PLATFORM PARTY



The account in the name of Igor Vartosu is a classic model of a political troll with a hidden identity. Its profile contains banners with messages promoted by the PPDA and its leader Andrei Nastase. In addition, four profile pictures bear the logo of Jurnal TV. On the one hand, this account attacked the PAS candidate calling her a “trust-fund kid,” affiliating her with a criminal (Borsetca), and saying she had no chance of winning. On the other hand, they praised independent candidate Grigore Cobzac, applauding his intransigency (March 12, 2020 post about the debate held by Jurnal TV). They also supported the narrative that PAS lost the chance to win in Hincesti because it did not cooperate with PPDA to nominate a common candidate (March 18, 2020).

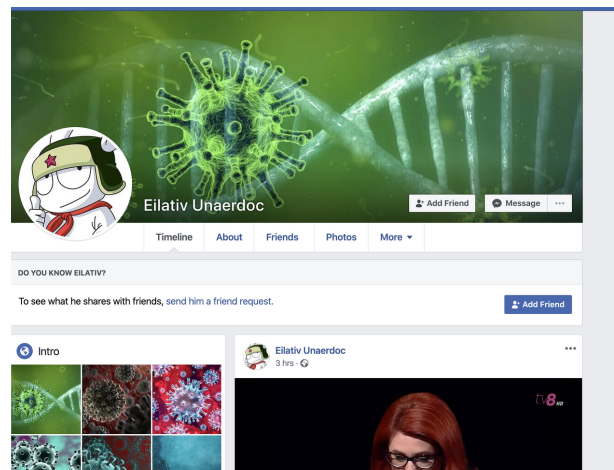


Taccount's affiliation with the PPDA is also demonstrated by the post attacking Maia Sandu (PAS) that was extensively shared in various Facebook groups on March 10. This behavior denotes an intention to reach as many people as possible and thereby to manipulate public opinion. The graphic identity elements of Jurnal TV indicate the account's affiliation with this media outlet which might compromise the outlet's image and confer credibility to the account, especially when it is very unlikely that people will verify the author's profile.



## 2. ACCOUNT WITH HIDDEN IDENTITY AND COVID- 19

Another account with a dubious identity supported the narrative that the by-election should have been canceled because of COVID-19. It is in the name of Eilatv Unaerdoc (Vitalie Codreanu, a current identity, spelled backwards) and shares relevant news and posts from other pages on its timeline. The comments and posts created and shared were mostly approached from a social perspective. Comments on the posts on the Jurnal TV page generated reactions which confirms the potential of this account to influence public opinion.



## March 15, 2020: Comments to Jurnal TV posts

JURNAL.MD  
**Până la această oră la Hâncești au votat 16% din alegători**  
În satul Bălceana, unde a fost confirmat un caz de COVID-19, la urnele de vo...

36 24 comments 3 shares



**Eilativ Unaerdoc** Nu si sa presupunem ca la-ti ales , sa infectat si a murit !!! Si ce facem mai departe iar ALEGERI ALEGERI ALEGERI.

Si mai cheltuim 1.2 milioane lei pentru alte alegeri.

2 cazuri in Hincesti!!!

Oameni ginditiva la sanatatea voastra nu la alegerile lor , ca de voi si de sanatatea voastra no sa se gindeasca nimeni.

Polita de asigurare obligatorie nu te face nemuritor si nici nu stiu daca o sa te ajute impotriva COVID-19.

Like · Reply · 4w



JURNAL.MD  
**Sergiu Litvinenco: Alegătorii din Logănești, raionul Hâncești sunt transportați organizat la secțiile de vot**

76 35 comments 56 shares



**Eilativ Unaerdoc** Alegeri , Alegeri , Alegeri dar baba tușeste, dureri de cap, febra si slabiciuni in picioare. 2 cazuri in Hincesti!!!

Principalul sai aleaga si apoi poate sa moara cu sufletul curat.

Stati acasa si ginditiva la sanatatea voastra nu la alegerile lor , ca de voi si de sanatatea voastra no sa se gindeasca nimeni.

Oameni Polita de asigurare obligatorie nu te face nemuritor si nici nu stiu daca o sa te ajute impotriva COVID-19.

Like · Reply · 4w



JURNAL.MD  
**Alegerile din Hâncești puteau fi amânate doar în cazuri excepționale precum război, calamități naturale susține...**

182 170 comments 42 shares



**Eilativ Unaerdoc** Alegeri , Alegeri , Alegeri dar baba tușeste, dureri de cap, febra si slabiciuni in picioare. 2 cazuri in Hincesti!!!

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Oameni Polita de asigurare obligatorie nu te face nemuritor si nici nu stiu daca o sa te ajute impotriva COVID-19.

Like · Reply · 4w



## Activity unrelated to Jurnal TV posts



**Eilativ Unaerdoc**

2 Apr · 🌐 · Pandemia de coronavirus i-a speriat și pe romii din Soroca. Unii ne-au spus că ies din case doar când au nevoie să meargă la medic sau să cumpere de mâncare. În rest, se văd nevoiți să stea în locuințe pentru că le este teamă de infectare. Alții afirmă că, pentru a nu se îmbolnăvi, se roagă...



1 comment



**Eilativ Unaerdoc**

10 Apr · 🌐 · Alexandra Chiabur, o pensionară din Chișinău, în vârstă de 66 de ani, a ajuns la marginea disperării. Plânge în hohote și spune că „este gata să se arunce peste balcon” după ce a fost amendată cu 22500 de lei pentru că ar fi încălcat regimul de izolare la domiciliu, impus de autorități...



5 shares



**Eilativ Unaerdoc**

20 hrs · 🌐 · "Mama a fost telefonata si i s-a spus ca daca nu sterg postarea o sa fiu concediat pe dosar penal". Declaratiile asistentului medical care a spus ca angajatii de la ambulante au echipament de protectie de proasta calitate



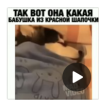
**Eilativ Unaerdoc**

11 Apr · 🌐 · Când ieșim din starea de urgență, pe 15 mai sau pe 15 iunie? Cel mai buna varianta 15 decembrie cum se zice dar cit o mai ramas, olecutica !!!



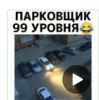
**Eilativ Unaerdoc**

Yesterday · 🌐



**Eilativ Unaerdoc**

Yesterday · 🌐



**Eilativ Unaerdoc**

11 Apr · 🌐 · Corpul unui cetățean moldovean care a decedat de coronavirus în Italia a fost cremat. Procedura a avut loc la cererea familiei decedatului. Alte două persoane care au murit infectate de COVID-19 peste hotare încă nu au fost repatriate. Ministrul de Externe, Oleg Tulea, a spus la...



The COMMENTS section for a post is a space where the public can validate the message delivered by one source to another source. In addition, this section outlines (albeit in a fragmentary way) public opinion regarding the issue covered by the media outlets' posts. Therefore, any attempt to distort the message through tendentious interpretations by dubious entities (as presented above) has the potential to manipulate. It is difficult to estimate the effects generated by these instruments of disinformation and manipulation through social networks; however, given the dynamics of activity and the persistence with which these accounts comment and taking into consideration the fact that the public reacts to comments, the phenomenon of fake accounts actively posting during elections is an important issue that is worthy of research. Such actions should be prevented because they are an additional factor in disinformation and manipulation.

# Conclusions and recommendations

The activities on Facebook of 5 media outlets—Jurnal TV, TV8, Sputnik, NTV Moldova, and Publika—and of 15 journalists on their teams differed in terms of quantity during the by-election campaign. The posts increased after critical events such as the exclusion of the Shor Party candidate from the race, the protests that followed, and the debates and reached a peak on the day of the election after which they decreased.

The COVID-19 pandemic permeated the entire parliamentary by-election in Hincesti. TV8 and Jurnal TV promoted messages to postpone it while NTV Moldova, Sputnik, and Publika kept silent. Journalists acted similarly to the media outlets they represent.

Media outlets in their posts usually complied with Article 1.8 of the Moldovan Journalist's Code of Ethics, except for NTV Moldova which engaged in political partisanship. An analysis of posts by media outlets revealed a neutral attitude towards the PAS candidate, while the PSRM candidate was generally criticized. The same trend can be observed in the journalists' posts; however, they had a much more critical attitude towards the PSRM candidate while the journalists from Jurnal TV showed a negative attitude towards PAS candidate, too.

Furthermore, the study data showed that traditional methods of disinformation and manipulation are compatible with the characteristics of new media such as the social network Facebook. Trolling activities through fake accounts with political affiliations or hidden identities confirm that elections are events of interest and that social networks, in this case Facebook, can be a suitable environment for conducting disinformation campaigns.

Therefore, we recommend the following:

- In covering elections on social networks (e.g., Facebook), media outlets and journalists should comply with the standards of professional ethics and should pay special attention to Article 1.8 and to Article 2.40 of the Moldovan Journalist's Code of Ethics.
- The status of social networks should be re-conceptualized in the Journalist's Code of Ethics taking into consideration both the opportunities and dangers of the online environment.
- Critical thinking among information consumers on social networks should be developed so that they can identify manipulation and disinformation techniques, including trolling.
- The monitoring of Facebook pages of media outlets and journalists should continue, particularly in connection with the presidential elections in 2020.