



MONITORING REPORT

**Activity of media outlets and journalists on the social network
Facebook during the campaign for the presidential election on
November 1, 2020**



This report has been produced as part of the “Monitoring Social Networks in Elections” project, implemented by the Independent Journalism Center (IJC) and funded by the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings, and conclusions set forth are the responsibility of the IJC and do not necessarily reflect the vision of the United States Department of State.

Embassy of the United States of America

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

This monitoring report presents the mode and dynamics of the activities of 5 media outlets and 15 journalists on Facebook, the most popular social network in Moldova, during the campaign for the presidential election on November 1, 2020.

The study was conceptualized theoretically and tested empirically in the following context:

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

The 2020 presidential election in the Republic of Moldova took place on **November 1**. Citizens go to polling stations to directly elect the president of the country, a position that, according to the constitution, is the guarantor of sovereignty, national independence, unity, and territorial integrity. Eight candidates were registered in the electoral race: (1) **Renato Usatii** (Our Party, PN); (2) **Andrei Nastase** (Dignity and Truth Platform, PDA); (3) **Maia Sandu** (Action and Solidarity Party, PAS); (4) **Tudor Deliu** (Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova, PLDM); (5) **Igor Dodon** (independent candidate); (6) **Violeta Ivanov** (Shor Party); (7) **Octavian Ticu** (National Unity Party, PUN); (8) **Dorin Chirtoaca** (Electoral Bloc Unirea).

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The **purpose** of this study is to analyze the dynamics of the activities of 15 journalists and 5 media outlets and the content they posted on the social network Facebook between September 21 and 27, 2020 to determine how they referred to the presidential election and to evaluate how the general provisions of the Journalist's Code of Ethics were observed, particularly Article 1.6 which condemns political partisanship, political and ideological propaganda, and electoral campaigning. The criteria for selecting the media outlets, journalists and relevant posts are in Table 1. The list of media outlets monitored and information on their Facebook pages are in Table 2.

The objectives of this monitoring study are as follow:

- [1] To assess how journalists and the media use the social platform Facebook to report on the political and electoral discourse of electoral competitors by systemically collecting open data published on Facebook profiles and pages.
- [2] To assess the activities of the media outlets and their journalists from the perspective of compliance with the Journalist's Code of Ethics and to determine their neutrality or political affiliation by analyzing their posts on personal pages.

The general provisions of the Journalist's Code of Ethics, specifically Article 1.6, condemn:

- ⇒ Any attempt to involve journalists in activities of **political partisanship** or in ideological or financial mercenary activities, **propaganda** or **information warfare, including trolling**.
- ⇒ Dissemination of messages prohibited by law (hate speech, homophobia, anti-Semitism, discrimination, etc.), as well as **political** and religious **propaganda** and **electoral campaigning**.

The attitude towards a certain candidate in the presidential election expressed in posts on Facebook can prove or disprove an affiliation of journalists and media outlets with certain parties or politicians. With that in mind, this indicator was used to assess the accuracy and fairness of journalists in their presentations about electoral candidates.

Table 1. Criteria for selecting media outlets, journalists and identifying posts related to elections

5 official Facebook pages of media outlets*	15 personal Facebook profiles of journalists**	652 posts related to elections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Area of coverage - Language diversity - Audience and popularity - Number of followers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Renown and influence in the public space - Experience in journalism - Audience and popularity - Number of friends, followers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Electoral nature - Public status - Informational importance for the public - Shares in timeline - Potential to influence public opinion regarding candidates

* Data on outlets were collected on September 12, 2020.

** The names of journalists were anonymized.

Table 2. Media outlets monitored and information about their Facebook pages


Name of outlet	Description on Facebook page	No. of followers
NTV Moldova¹	Page created on January 25, 2016. Managed by 13 accounts located in Moldova. Does not have the “Verified” badge*** on Facebook.	37,870
Primul în Moldova²	“Primul în Moldova is in everyone’s homes today! We are waiting for you every day with four newscasts to show you what is happening in the country and in the world. We want to convince you that we deserve your attention.” Page created on November 3, 2019. Managed by 14 accounts located in Moldova. Does not have the “Verified” badge on Facebook.	20,051
PUBLIKA.MD³	“PUBLIKA.MD, the online leader in Moldova and the only news site that offers news 24/24. Fast, current, correct, and complete.” Page created on March 31, 2010. Managed by 14 accounts located in Moldova and an account with primary location in Romania. Does not have the “Verified” badge on Facebook.	186,564
Unimedia.info	“Log on to the page of the UNIMEDIA news portal (unimedia.info) to be informed correctly and impartially.” Page created on June 8, 2011. Has the “Verified” badge on Facebook.	109,539

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/AccentTVMoldova>

² <https://www.facebook.com/Primul-%C3%AEEn-Moldova-113247366781343>

³ <https://www.facebook.com/Publika.md/>

Jurnal TV⁴	“Jurnal TV is a generalist television station with the most objective news, the coolest shows, and the richest entertainment content.” Page created on August 4, 2009. Does not have the “Verified” badge on Facebook.	230,165
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*** The “Verified” badge  appears next to a Facebook page or next to the account in search and profile. Facebook thereby confirms that this account is authentic and represents a public figure, a celebrity, or a global brand.

To avoid problems and ethical violations, only data with public status from the POSTS category (timeline) were collected (Screenshot 1). Public information is addressed to the general public and is published on social networks without restrictions on sharing and without privacy filters. Such posts have, from a technical point of view, the possibility to reach a larger group of people, and their authors usually want to influence public opinion in one way or another.

Screenshot 1. Difference between the symbols marking public posts and posts with confidentiality settings



Data were collected from the activity stream the day after the post was made, and if other posts, videos or images were subsequently added, they were not encoded. The data were analyzed using quantitative content analysis. In addition, case studies were conducted to analyze prominent trends from a qualitative perspective.

We analyzed posts visible in the timeline before readers were redirected to a platform other than Facebook (without accessing links). Also, the videos published were encoded separately without being viewed.

The study was conducted in the full recognition that all posts shared on Facebook do not fully represent the content produced by media outlets, both during the monitoring period and in general.

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/jurnaltv.md>

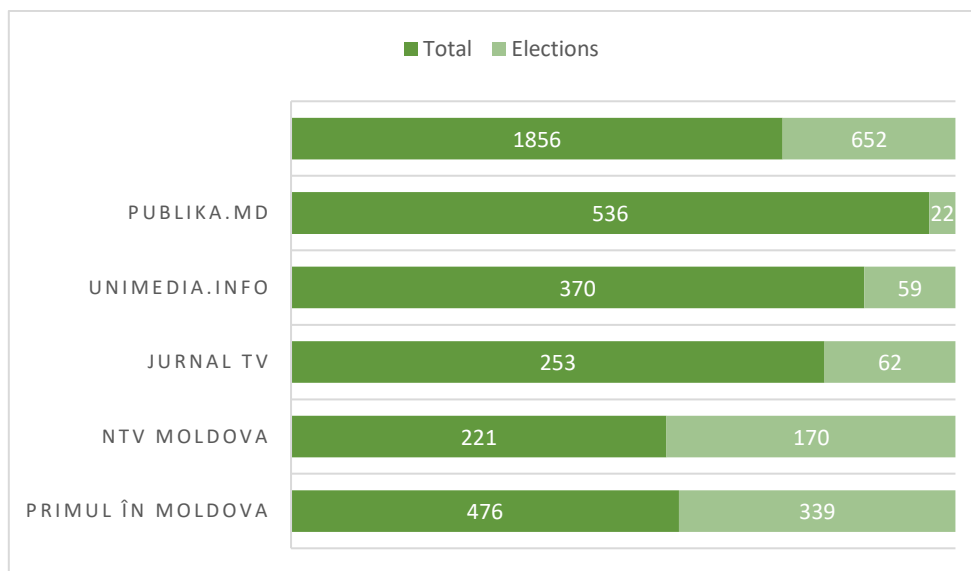
MAIN FINDINGS AND TRENDS

Media outlets published a considerable number of posts covering the election process, election scandals, opinion polls, actions, promises and political and populist statements of the candidates among other categories of news.

A total of **1,856 posts** on the 5 Facebook pages of the media outlets selected for monitoring were collected and coded; of those, **652 posts** were identified as election-related information shared on the networks (Chart 1).

The 15 journalists monitored made **41 posts**, two of which violated the provisions of Article 1.6 by supporting a specific presidential candidate. Whether journalists posting political preferences on social networks violates the Code of Ethics deserves extensive discussion and may serve as a topic for another type of research.

Chart 1. Posts published by media outlets monitored between September 21 and 27



COVID-19 was addressed by all media outlets, but compared with our previous study, there was no emphasis on the fact that the virus could influence the way elections were conducted.

All the media outlets monitored covered the presidential election to some extent.

The largest volume of election-related posts was published by the television stations affiliated with the Party of Socialists (PSRM), namely **Primul în Moldova** (339 out of 476) and **NTV Moldova** (170 out of 221), which constituted about **60%** of the content of posts published on the Facebook pages of these outlets (Chart 1). Analysis of the posting methods and topics revealed that the news content of NTV Moldova differed very little from that of Primul în Moldova, creating the impression that it was the product of close coordination and collaboration between the editorial teams of the two media outlets. Likewise, the titles of posts on the Facebook pages of both TV stations were strikingly similar.

The information published on social networks was used to amplify the electoral campaign messages of independent candidate Igor Dodon who is supported by PSRM. Proof of this is the frequency of posts that presented Dodon in a favorable light and referred to his undeniable chances of winning presented in surveys and statistics, visits around the country, social and economic reforms undertaken at his initiative, increases in pensions and salaries, the construction of aqueducts, the reduction of loan percentages at the National Bank, as well as the predictions of some opinion leaders regarding Dodon's victory in the elections, among others.

One of the key elements in the postings was attacks on his opponents, especially the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) candidate Maia Sandu. In this context, both TV stations also exploited the religious element publicizing Igor Dodon's congratulations addressed to citizens on the occasion of religious holidays. A news story titled "SURVEY: The future President of the Republic of Moldova must be a MAN and must be FAITHFUL" published by both television stations exemplifies how they attempted to influence viewers' choices. Moreover, Primul în Moldova deleted or archived most of the posts on its page after a relatively short period of time, leaving mostly newscasts online. This seems curious and dubious at the same time, revealing a behavior that is less common in the online environment and could indicate the intention of the outlet to hide some of the content it made public. Both outlets also published a fake story that the Russian vaccine Sputnik-V had allegedly been validated by the World Health Organization.

Primul în Moldova and NTV seriously violated the Journalist's Code of Ethics and Article 1.6 in particular by engaging in partisanship and political propaganda not only for Igor

Dodon but also for representatives of the PSRM leadership, thus launching a campaign to support the Socialists in the election.

Unimedia.info and **Jurnal TV** had a similar volume of posts related to the election and the candidates, neither of which exceeded 25% of their total number. These outlets, unlike *Primul în Moldova* and *NTV*, did not commit significant violations of the provisions of the Code and of Article 1.6. **Publika.md** made the smallest number of posts about the election and was also the most neutral outlet in that regard.

Jurnal TV was the only outlet whose journalists exploited the social network as a forum for discussing and expressing opinions about politics, geopolitics, society and, during the monitoring period, the election. Only a journalist from *NTV Moldova* could compare with the journalists from *Jurnal TV* in terms of dynamics of posts. Otherwise, the journalists did not engage intensely on social networks around the election.

Surveys are a tool used in election campaigns to assess candidates' chances of winning. Often, however, survey results can also be tools for manipulating public opinion, instilling greater trust in a certain candidate and influencing undecided voters (Table 3). The validity of these surveys can be verified by analyzing the profile of the research organizations/institutes that performed them in terms of credibility and connections with certain political entities.

Table 3. Results of pre-election surveys promoted on social networks

Primul în Moldova	NTV	Publika.md	Unimedia.info	Jurnal TV
Surveys predicting the chances of presidential candidates to win				
SURVEY: Regardless of who will duel in the second round of the presidential election, Igor Dodon will win ⁵	Igor Dodon will win the presidential election in the second round of voting, regardless of who his opponent will be. These are the data of the latest Vox Populi survey - September 2020 ⁶ Every third citizen in our country has the greatest trust in Igor Dodon , according to the latest survey ⁷	Igor Dodon and Maia Sandu are at the top of Moldovan preferences in the presidential election to take place next Sunday. At least that is what the data from the Vox Populi Sociological Study organized by the Association of Sociologists and Demographers of Moldova showed. ⁹	A new survey, more data. Research conducted by the International Republican Institute shows that the PAS leader Maia Sandu enjoys the most trust of citizens. ¹⁰	According to IRI surveys, Maia Sandu "beats Igor Dodon in the first round." ¹¹

⁵<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/345020583604019>

⁶<https://www.facebook.com/ntvmoldova/posts/1363811577122646>

⁷<https://www.facebook.com/ntvmoldova/posts/1363799750457162>

⁹<https://www.facebook.com/Publika.md/posts/3381992278504207>

¹⁰<https://www.facebook.com/unimedia.info/posts/4375396852530849>

¹¹<https://www.facebook.com/jurnaltv.md/posts/10158454787345450>

	Igor Dodon remains the leader in the presidential election, according to the latest sociological survey ⁸			
SURVEY: Igor Dodon enjoys the most trust of citizens at 33.2%, with Maia Sandu at only 21.3% ¹²	Igor Dodon remains the political figure who enjoys the greatest trust of the citizens of our country. One third of citizens expressed this opinion in a new survey conducted by the Association of Sociologists and Demographers. The research also showed that the country's president remains the favorite in the November 1 elections. ¹³		In the presidential election to be held next Sunday, Maia Sandu and Igor Dodon will reach round 2. The PAS leader would get 20%, and Igor Dodon 18%. At least that is what a survey of the International Republican Institute shows. ¹⁴	
The future president of Moldova must be a man. This is the opinion of every second citizen of our country, according to the latest sociological survey Vox Populi – September 2020, conducted by the Association of Sociologists and Demographers. ¹⁵	The future president of Moldova must be a man. This is the opinion of every second citizen of our country, according to the latest sociological survey Vox Populi. ¹⁶			
Surveys predicting the chances of PSRM to win in the parliamentary elections				
If a parliamentary election were to take place next Sunday, five parties would enter Parliament, and the PSRM would get the most votes from the citizens. These are the data presented in the sociological survey Vox Populi, September 2020	SURVEY: If an early parliamentary election were to take place next Sunday, five parties would enter Parliament, and PSRM would get the most votes ¹⁷	The Party of Socialists is a definite leader in parliamentary elections. According to the study Vox Populi, September 2020, conducted by the Association of Sociologists and Demographers, the party would have almost 38% of the votes. The research also shows that half of the population has a positive attitude towards holding early parliamentary elections this year. ¹⁸	If parliamentary elections were to take place next Sunday, only three parties would enter Parliament. At least that is what a survey by the International Republican Institute shows. ¹⁹	

⁸<https://www.facebook.com/ntvmoldova/posts/1363806780456459>

¹²<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/345006113605466>

¹³<https://www.facebook.com/ntvmoldova/posts/1364210440416093>

¹⁴<https://www.facebook.com/unimedia.info/posts/4375449532525581>

¹⁵<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/345008610271883>

¹⁶<https://www.facebook.com/ntvmoldova/posts/1364073593763111>

¹⁷<https://www.facebook.com/ntvmoldova/posts/1363801720456965>

¹⁸<https://www.facebook.com/ntvmoldova/posts/1364211137082690>

¹⁹<https://www.facebook.com/unimedia.info/posts/4376191065784761>

NTV and Primul în Moldova promoted the results of surveys by showing that Igor Dodon was the candidate guaranteed to win, and Jurnal TV presented only the possible victory of the PAS candidate Maia Sandu. Unimedia and Publika presented the results of surveys in a balanced manner.

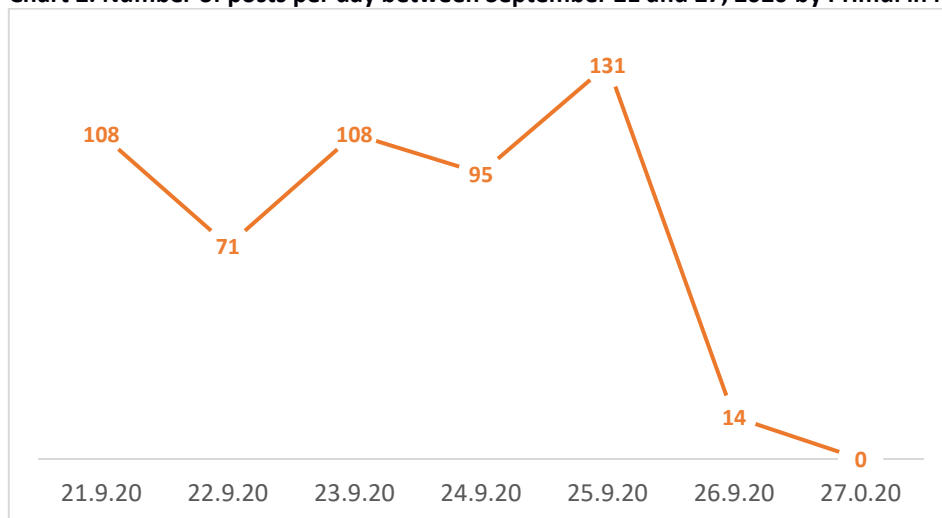
Four out of the five outlets also presented information about the positive attitude of citizens towards possible parliamentary elections.

DATA INTERPRETATION. PRIMUL ÎN MOLDOVA

Manner of posting

In all, **476 posts** were published between September 21 and 27 on the Facebook page²⁰ of the television station Primul în Moldova. The daily average of interactions with these posts was 843 including likes, comments, and shares of the page. The outlet published posts in Romanian and their translation into Russian. According to Chart 2, the largest number of posts was made on September 25 after the fire at the National Philharmonic. On average, however, the station had 70 posts per day except for Sunday when no activity was identified on the outlet's Facebook page.

Chart 2. Number of posts per day between September 21 and 27, 2020 by Primul în Moldova



²⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/Primul-%C3%AEn-Moldova-113247366781343>

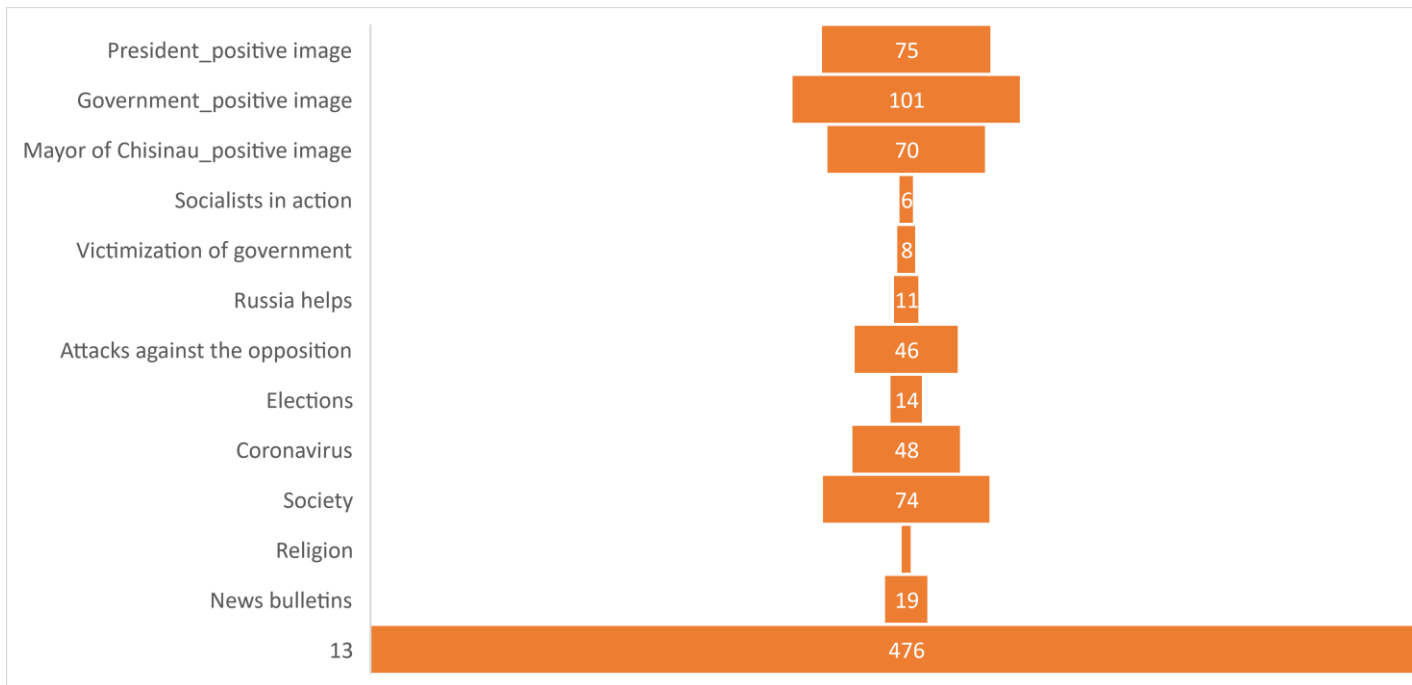
Thematic categories of posts

Analyzing the thematic categories of the public posts that appeared on the television station's page and the frequency of their publication, it can be said that the Facebook page was used as a tool to amplify news from its website to build a positive image for key representatives of the PSRM.

In Chart 3 we can see that the President (N = 75), the Prime Minister and the government (N = 101), as well as the Mayor of Chisinau (N = 70) were the key protagonists of posts on the station's Facebook page. Of all posts, 246 praised their political achievements and their contribution to the country's development.

Another thematic category that also had a considerable number of posts was attacks against the opposition (N = 46), focusing on the incident with a teacher in Ocnita who allegedly spread propaganda in favor of PAS presidential candidate Maia Sandu. The next widely covered topics by the television station were the coronavirus (N = 48) and news about certain social events (N = 74), but the content was relatively neutral from a political point of view. Two somewhat curious other categories of posts were "Russia helps" (N = 11) and "Victimization of government" (N = 8) both of which were reminiscent of Russian state-controlled media articles. Primul în Moldova also made 14 posts about the process of organizing the elections.

Chart 3. Number of posts per thematic categories between September 21 and 27, 2020 by Primul în Moldova



Religion -4

On Facebook the station strongly promoted the following:

1. Dodon’s presidential candidacy by covering:

⇒ Igor Dodon’s visits around the country: (1) “Igor Dodon had a meeting with the workers of the Balti Railway Node and visited the Balti-Gaz company (PHOTO)”²¹; (2) “The president visited the Alexander Pushkin Museum (PHOTO), (VIDEO)”²²; (3) “The head of state inspected the roads in the north of the country: Road rehabilitation is one of the basic objectives of the current government (PHOTO)”²³; (4) “Igor Dodon in Orheiul Vechi: A new weekend, a new opportunity to explore our dear country”²⁴.

⇒ Speeches at the UN and the president’s talks with officials of other countries: (1) “Igor Dodon at the UN: Transnistrian settlement should be based on the initiatives of Moldova and not on those developed abroad”²⁵; (2) “Igor Dodon at the meeting with the British Ambassador: We are determined to hold free and democratic elections (VIDEO)”²⁶; (3) “Igor Dodon: I have very good communication with all ambassadors accredited to Chisinau, including the US Ambassador”²⁷.

²¹<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/345114933594584>
²²<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/342758810496863>
²³<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/345251906914220>
²⁴<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/346880813417996>
²⁵<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/344521253653952>
²⁶<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/343575247081886>
²⁷<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/344984766940934>

⇒ Populist initiatives and promises of the president: (1) “Igor Dodon: I will propose providing voters with free face masks at the November 1 election”²⁸; (2) “The proposal to cancel the road tax, which will be applied from January 1, 2021, belongs to President Igor Dodon”²⁹; (3) “PRESIDENTIAL SCHOLARSHIP FOR THE BEST STUDENT: He designed a gazebo on the campus, won an invention competition, and got a job at the university where he still studies. We are talking about a student from the Technical University nominated for the presidential scholarship. Mircea Zubcu also managed to impress our film crew with some of his inventions”³⁰; (4) “Igor Dodon: In the near future, the state will develop a national strategy for the rehabilitation of the irrigation system in agriculture”³¹; (5) “Igor Dodon: Doctors very much hope that we will come up with major investments in medicine”³²; (6) “Igor Dodon: We must do good things so that people want to live in our country”³³; (7) “Igor Dodon announces the construction of a new National Philharmonic: We must raise a new building that will stand for centuries to come”³⁴.

⇒ The messages with which Igor Dodon entered the campaign, his activity report, and other populist messages of the current president: (1) “Igor Dodon congratulated the faithful on the occasion of the Nativity of Mary”³⁵; (2) “Igor Dodon at the UN: Discrimination based on



Captură 1. Postare Primul în Moldova 25.9.20

gender, origin, race, religion, or disability still persists in the world (VIDEO)”³⁶; (3) “WHERE ARE WE GOING? Moldova must become a state in which people want to live. It is the main message that Igor Dodon will promote in the campaign for electing the president. The head of state says that if the things started by the current government continue over

the next three or four years, our country will look different (Screenshot 2).”

²⁸<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/344616173644460>

²⁹<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/344610856978325>

³⁰<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/345377916901619>

³¹<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/344578333648244>

³²<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/344576800315064>

³³<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/345842930188451>

³⁴<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/345837013522376>

³⁵<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/342511267188284>

³⁶<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/342939090478835>

⇒ Election scenarios favorable for Dodon and unfavorable for the opposition: (1) “SCENARIOS FOR THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION. The current head of state **Igor Dodon will get a second term** as president, regardless of whom he will compete against in the second round of the presidential elections. At least, that is what the September survey of the Association of Sociologists and Demographers shows. In addition, **Igor Dodon enjoys** the greatest trust among Moldovans, and his actions are appreciated by every third inhabitant of the country.”³⁷; (2) “SURVEY: The future president of Moldova must be a **MAN** and he must be **FAITHFUL**”³⁸; (3) “SURVEY: Regardless of whom he will compete against in the second round of the presidential elections, **Igor Dodon will win**”³⁹; (4) “SURVEY: If early elections to Parliament were to take place next Sunday, five parties would enter, and the PSRM would get the most votes”⁴⁰; (5) “SURVEY: **Igor Dodon enjoys** the most trust of citizens at 33.2% while Maia Sandu registers **only** 21.3%.”⁴¹

Judging by the circulation of posts among Facebook visitors with messages about the profile of the next president, such polls have an influence on voters (Screenshot 3).

Screenshot 3. Reaction to Post on Poll

“Nu avem nevoie de-o femeie (“stănută”), prinsă în mrejele “filaților”! Avem nevoie de un Om-conducător, un Presedonte Luptător, cu scaun la cap, cu mintea lucidă, care n-a făcut parte din guvernările mafioate și care nu s-a “înfruptat” din miliardul furat, ca și toți ceilalți! Capito!!”

 14

13 comentarii

“We don’t need a woman caught up in the toils of Filat supporters! We need a Man leader, a Fighter President, level-headed, rational, who was not part of the mafia governments or who “enjoyed” the stolen billion, like all the others! Understand that!”

2. Elections for all, transparent and in accordance with the rules:

⇒ Elections for all: “RIGHT TO VOTE FOR ALL. The government and the Central Electoral Commission assure us that they will make every effort to ensure the proper functioning of all polling stations in the states where Moldovan citizens live or work. Even so, in the context of the pandemic, the final decision will be made

³⁷<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/345349246904486>

³⁸<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/345279693578108>

³⁹<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/345020583604019>

⁴⁰<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/345008610271883>

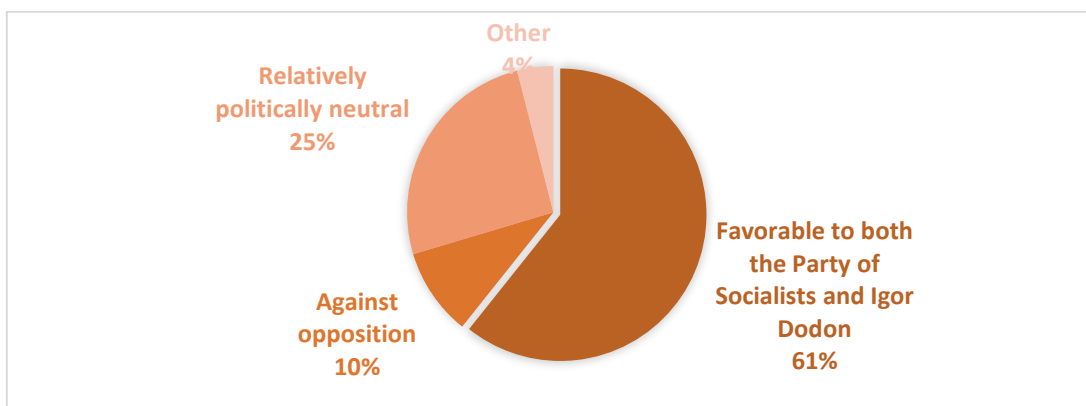
⁴¹<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/345006113605466>

by the authorities of the countries in which Chisinau intends to open offices. The organization of the electoral process was discussed at the weekly meeting of the country's leadership."⁴²; (2) "The CEC decided to organize 139 polling stations abroad for the November 1 election"⁴³; (3) "WITHOUT polling stations in kindergartens and student dormitories"⁴⁴.

⇒ Transparent elections: (1) "ELECTIONS DISCUSSED IN BRUSSELS. The organization of the presidential election in Moldova was discussed by the Minister of Justice Fadei Nagacevski and the leadership of the Central Electoral Commission with representatives of the Venice Commission."⁴⁵; (2) "The organization of the presidential election in Moldova, discussed by the Minister of Justice with officials from the Venice Commission"⁴⁶.

With its activity on Facebook, Primul în Moldova confirmed its political affiliation with PSRM and support for candidate Igor Dodon in the campaign. This was demonstrated by the 61% of posts carrying messages favorable to both the Party of Socialists and Igor Dodon although he is registered as an independent candidate (Chart 4). The positive image of Igor Dodon was amplified on Facebook by the TV station presenting the candidate as a person who defends human rights, who is religious and loves Moldova, has initiative, is active and is in good relations with partners from both the East and West. The editorial team of the television station thus **violated** the provisions of the Moldovan Journalist's Code of Ethics by its openly political partisanship in favor of Igor Dodon.

Chart 4. Proportion of posts per thematic categories and political affiliation on Primul în Moldova



⁴²<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/342860643820013>

⁴³<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/346925713413506>

⁴⁴<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/342546297184781>

⁴⁵<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/345352033570874>

⁴⁶<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/345071393598938>

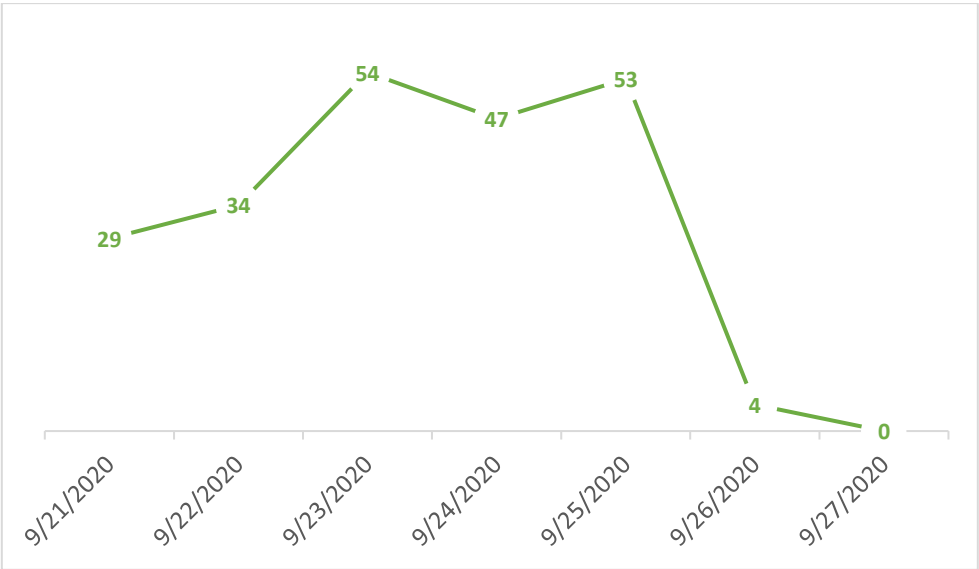
The journalists at Primul în Moldova who were monitored between September 21 and 27 have profiles with significant privacy filters and did not produce any public posts of interest for the study. Thus, it can be concluded that they do not use Facebook as a tool to communicate in their professional capacities.

DATA INTERPRETATION. NTV MOLDOVA

Manner of posting

In all, **221 posts** were published on the Facebook page⁴⁷ of television station NTV Moldova between September 21 and 27 with an average of 1,027 interactions per day including likes, comments, and shares. The outlet published posts in Romanian with translations into Russian. According to Chart 5, the greatest number of posts was made on September 25. On average, the station had 31 posts per day though on Sunday no activity was identified.

Chart 5. Number of posts per day between September 21 and 27 on NTV Moldova



Note: Activity on NTV Moldova was similar to that of TV station Primul în Moldova except for the number of posts which was half as many though NTV compensated for that with a higher rate of interactions. Otherwise, the categories of posts were similar in terms of topics and proportion

⁴⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/ntvmoldova>

Thematic categories of posts

NTV had categories with the same thematic content as Primul în Moldova that propagated a clearly positive image of the Party of Socialists and candidate Igor Dodon.

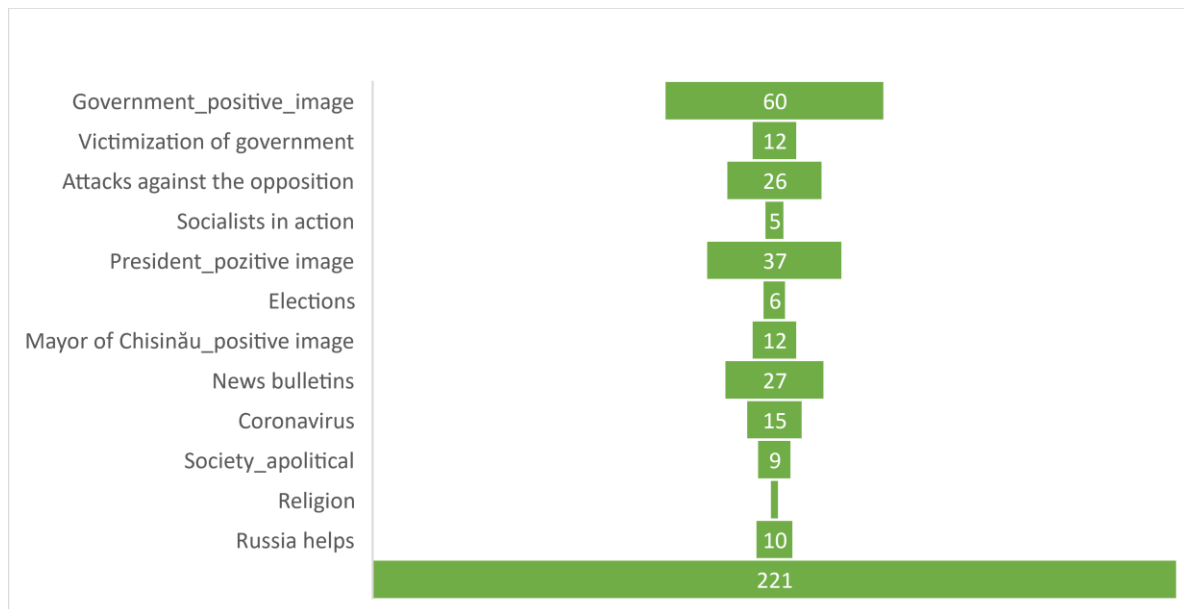
Chart 6 shows the thematic categories with the most posts promoted Igor Dodon (N = 37). This category also highlighted positive headlines about the work of the government (N = 60) and the Chisinau mayor's office (N = 12) and the Party of Socialists ("PSRM in action" N = 5) in a manner favorable to the PSRM party members who lead these institutions. To fuel a sense of compassion and increase people's empathy for this party, the TV station published 12 posts in which the government was victimized. This category is of particular interest because it sought to blame failures and unfulfilled promises of the government on state institutions that allegedly did not cooperate with each other.

In contrast with categories praising Dodon's government and Dodon himself was the category of attacks against the opposition (N = 26). Thus, many posts mentioned the incident with the teacher from Ocnita who, according to NTV Moldova, spread propaganda for the presidential candidate of the PAS party, Maia Sandu. Next was the thematic category "Russia helps" (N = 10) which referred to the geopolitical preferences of the country's leadership and how NTV Moldova amplified the aid and support offered to Moldova by Russia as a strategic partner of our country.

The six posts about the organization of the election presented it as an event well organized by the Central Electoral Commission in which the rights of expatriates would be respected by ensuring a sufficient number of polling stations and for which citizens would receive protective masks from the state on election day.

The coronavirus pandemic (N = 15) and social events were infrequently addressed by NTV Moldova in posts published during the study period.

Chart 6. Number of posts per thematic categories between September 21 and 27 by NTV Moldova



Religion - 2

The analysis of how thematic categories appeared in posts shows that news reporting on NTV Moldova and on Primul în Moldova appears to be the product of concerted coordination and cooperation between the editorial teams of the two media outlets including the titles of posts on their Facebook pages which were strikingly similar to each other. NTV did, however, allocate more space to promote government actions and initiatives. Instead of repeating the titles related to the president and the election, we present those that referred to other thematic categories favorable to the PSRM and Igor Dodon’s campaign:

1. An engaged and active government that is appreciated by citizens: (1) “The government’s decision to reduce VAT on fertilizers is welcomed by farmers”⁴⁸; (2) “THE STATE HELPS FARMERS: The weather caused damage of over 250 million lei to farmers in Gagauzia; however, the state did not abandon them in the face of this challenge that threatened their livelihoods. For the first time, the government has provided compensation for losses, in some cases even as much as 100 percent”⁴⁹; (3) “NEW EQUIPMENT FOR ANOFM: 15 district subdivisions of the National Agency for Employment [ANOFM] will be provided with laptops, video cameras, microphones, and headphones. The equipment will be used in a project to develop new skills for people looking for work. The donation came from the

⁴⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/ntvmoldova/posts/1362955117208292>

⁴⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/ntvmoldova/posts/1363275790509558>

Austrian Development Agency”⁵⁰; (4) “Several houses connected to the gas pipeline”⁵¹.

2. Victimization of the current government and the president: (1) “Political expert: Lately we are witnessing an aggressive campaign such that if the opposition candidate does not win, then the elections are rigged”⁵²; (2) “Justice reform was stopped by the High Court led by a representative of the parliamentary opposition, said Igor Dodon”⁵³; (3) “Igor Dodon said that political opponents have launched a dirty election campaign in which all cannons are aimed at him”⁵⁴.
3. Russia is Moldova’s trusted friend: (1) “In the coming weeks, Moldova could sign a loan agreement with Russia to obtain 200 million euros”⁵⁵; (2) “THE AGREEMENT WITH RUSSIA WILL BE SIGNED SOON”⁵⁶.
4. The opposition spreads political propaganda through a teacher: (1) “If PAS finds it natural for the teacher from Ocnita to call the pensioners “idiots,” we find it outrageous, said Alla Darovannaia”⁵⁷; (2) “The teacher who told students that the old people in Moldova are “idiots” is a counselor for the PAS party of Maia Sandu”⁵⁸; etc.

Both NTV and Primul în Moldova used the story of the teacher from Ocnita who allegedly spread propaganda for PAS to build an indirect negative campaign against the PAS candidate.

⁵⁰<https://www.facebook.com/ntvmoldova/posts/1364208947082909>

⁵¹<https://www.facebook.com/ntvmoldova/posts/1363078677195936>

⁵²<https://www.facebook.com/ntvmoldova/posts/1365795313590939>

⁵³<https://www.facebook.com/ntvmoldova/posts/1364700807033723>

⁵⁴<https://www.facebook.com/113247366781343/posts/345876506851760>

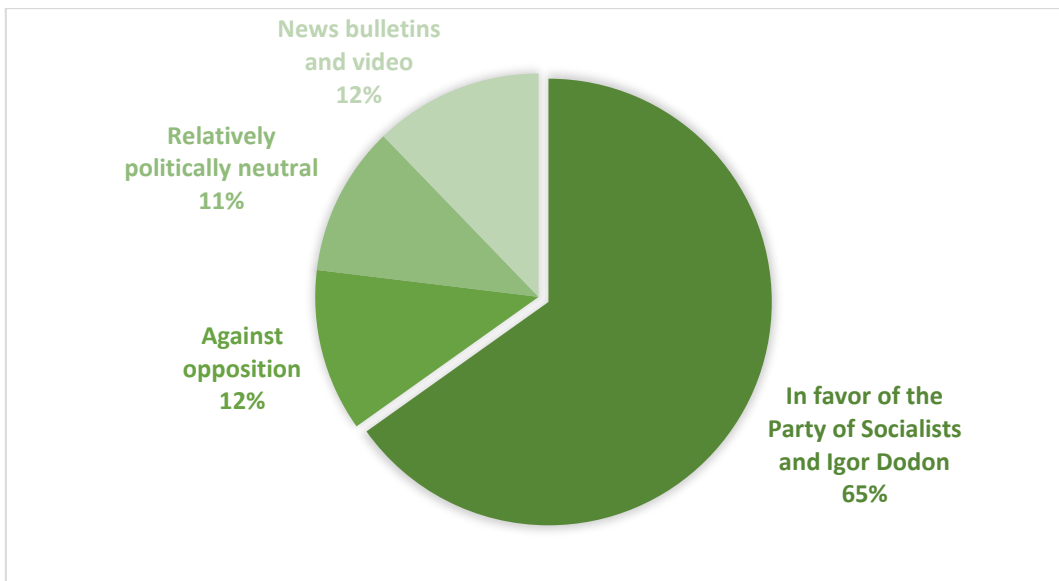
⁵⁵<https://www.facebook.com/ntvmoldova/posts/1363302567173547>

⁵⁶<https://www.facebook.com/ntvmoldova/posts/1364210023749468>

⁵⁷<https://www.facebook.com/ntvmoldova/posts/1363928167110987>

⁵⁸<https://www.facebook.com/ntvmoldova/posts/1363815657122238>

Chart 7. Proportion of posts per thematic categories and political affiliation on NTV Moldova



In conclusion, with 65% of all posts in favor of the Party of Socialists and Igor Dodon (Chart 7), NTV Moldova violated Article 1.6 of the Journalist’s Code of Ethics by mounting a political propaganda campaign to support them that limited the possibilities for citizens to reach objective opinions about the electoral competitors.

Disinformation

On September 22, both NTV and Primul în Moldova published news in Russian and Romanian saying that “the World Health Organization (WHO) appreciates Russia’s efforts in developing the new coronavirus vaccine” and that the Regional Director for Europe Hans Henri Kluge had announced that “the vaccine is safe” (screenshots 4 and 5).



Screenshot 4. NTV Moldova, September 22, 2020



Screenshot 5. Primul în Moldova, September 22, 2020

The organization/project StopFals fact checked the news story⁵⁹ and found that the WHO representative's statement in it was a translation from English of this text: "The WHO greatly appreciates the efforts that the Russian Federation has made to develop a vaccine against COVID-19, namely Sputnik V. Once again I want to thank Russia for its excellent efforts to create a safe and effective vaccine." Note that the WHO representative did not actually say that the vaccine was safe. Instead, the editors interpreted his statement in a misleading way, distorting the text in order to praise the achievements of the Russian Federation in the fight against COVID-19. This news story is a convincing example of the geopolitical affiliation of the two TV stations, both of which are pro-Kremlin.

Activity of NTV Moldova journalists

Two of the three journalists at NTV Moldova whose activities on social networks were monitored produced a total of **17 posts**. Unlike the journalists at Primul în Moldova, those at NTV frequently used Facebook to promote their professional activities, publishing links to the news and to programs they host on this television station. These journalists promoted narratives similar to those of the outlet they work for starting with those on social issues (how the new type of coronavirus affects society; the fire at the National Philharmonic; the work of Chisinau mayor's office and the mayor on 2 programs in which he was present) then continuing with reports on how beautiful Moldova is; on the actions of Moldovan authorities in relation to the Transnistrian region; nostalgic moments about the Soviet Union or training events for journalists with the participation of Russian

⁵⁹ <https://stopfals.md/ro/article/fals-oms-apreciaza-vaccinul-rusesc-sputnik-v-ca-fiind-sigur-si-eficient-180426>

journalists and ending with attacks against the political opposition in the presidential election, the victimization of Russia and of Moldovan expatriates there, and in contrast, the demonization of representatives of the European Union. Anti-European messages (Screenshot 6) were posted in response to the joint letter of September 25 addressed to EU representatives from candidates and potential candidates for president in opposition to Igor Dodon regarding Dodon's possible attempts to rig the election on November 1.

Для Санду, Усатога, Делиу, Цыку и Киртоака есть диаспора первого сорта, есть второго. Второго, конечно, в России. И именно там результаты голосования "можно фальсифицировать". Поэтому не нужно не нужно там открывать количество избирательных участков, считают проеввропейские политики, выступающие за равные права и истинно европейские ценности. Но не для всех. Письмо адресовано европейским чиновникам. А кому ж ещё? Ренато надо в Москву слетать. Боюсь, на руках его там носить, как шесть лет назад, не будут. С ноги...

Screenshot 6. Journalist of NTV. September 26, 2020

For Sandu, Usatii, Deliu, Ticu, and Chirtoaca, there are first-class and second-class expatriates. The second class is of course in Russia. There, the election results "can be falsified." Therefore, there is no need to open many polling stations there, say pro-European politicians, who advocate for equal rights and truly European values. But not for everyone. The letter is addressed to European officials. Who else could it be? Renato has to fly to Moscow. I'm afraid they won't make as much of him there anymore as they did six years ago. He'll get a kick ...

This post is proof of support for both Igor Dodon and Russia, and at the same time of an attack against Igor Dodon's opponents in the election and against representatives of the European Union. Denigrating any local or foreign entity that tried to target the Russian president negatively, in any situation, but especially during an election campaign is a strategy widely applied by state media in the Russian Federation.

DATA INTERPRETATION. JURNAL TV

Before presenting the interpretation of the data collected during our monitoring, here are some observations regarding the way in which Jurnal TV managed its online presence.

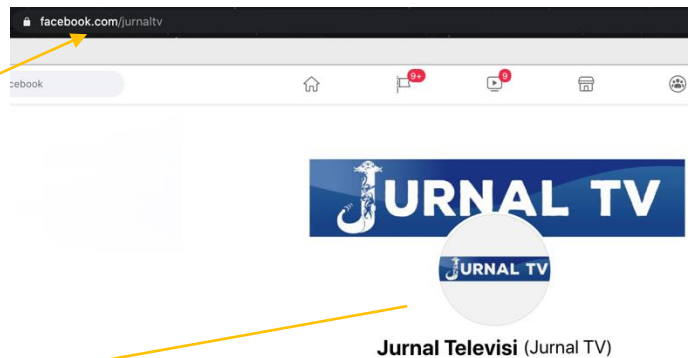
During the preliminary monitoring stage, difficulties were found in accessing the Facebook page of Jurnal TV on the television's website. The Facebook button (Screenshot 7) on the Jurnal TV website leads to a foreign account with a similar name. Specifically, the URL (uniform resource locator) [Facebook.com/jurnaltv](https://www.facebook.com/jurnaltv) leads to the profile of Jurnal Televisi (Jurnal TV), which belongs to an Indonesian media outlet (screenshots 8 and 9).⁶⁰ Given the similarity of the URLs of the two media outlets, the only distinction being the .md domain for the Moldovan outlet and .net for the Indonesian one, the error might be

⁶⁰ <https://jurnaltv.net/>

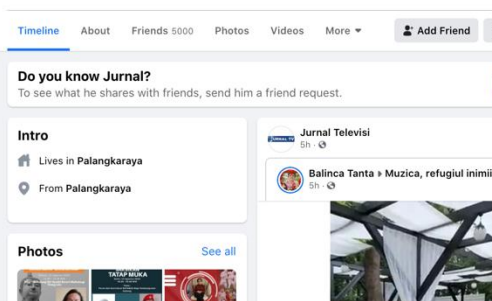
unintentional. Even so, such flaws do not favor Jurnal TV's image and need to be corrected.



Screenshot 7. Facebook button on jurnaltv.md



Screenshot 8. jurnatv.net website

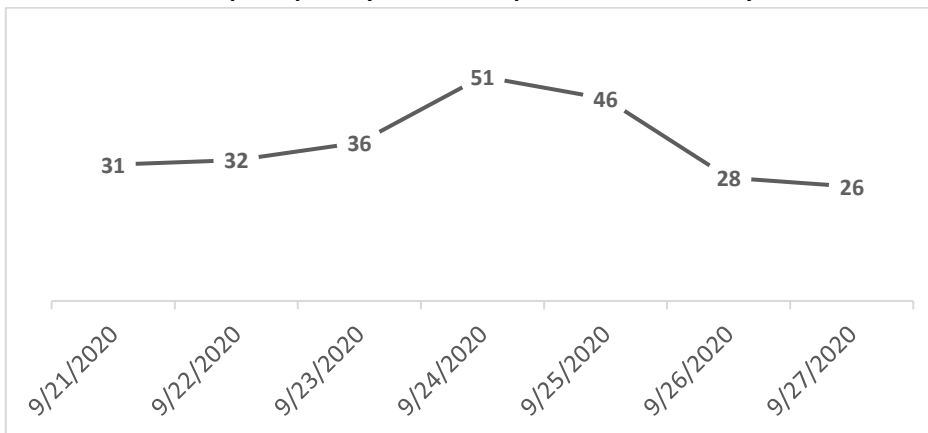


Screenshot 9. Facebook page of Jurnal Televisi

Manner of posting

In all, **253 posts** were published on the Facebook page of Jurnal TV between September 21 and 27. The daily average of interactions (likes, comments, and shares) with these posts was 3,134 which was the highest interaction rate among all five outlets monitored. The outlet posts only in Romanian. According to Chart 8, the most posts were made on September 24. On average, the station had 34 posts a day without a break on Sunday.

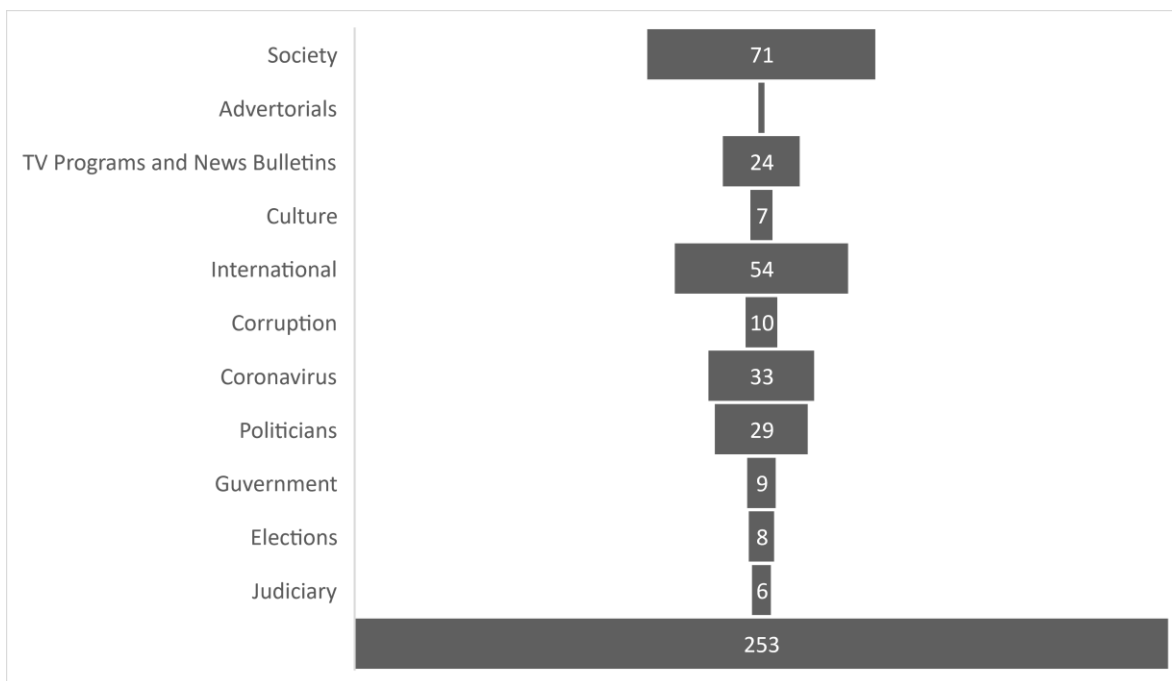
Chart 8. Number of posts per day between September 21 and 27 by Jurnal TV



Jurnal TV addressed a much greater diversity of topics on its Facebook page (Chart 9) than either NTV or Primul în Moldova did. The largest thematic category (N = 71) was social topics without any political undercurrents focusing instead on events such as accidents, natural disasters, and other such events. It is worth commenting on the sensationalism in these topics as there was no lack of violence or victims. Jurnal TV posts presented an apocalyptic world, marked by blood, flames, and “terrible,” “awful,” “shocking,” “alarming” scenes with morbid details, especially when it came to road accidents and suicides. Jurnal TV applied this practice both when writing the news and promoting it on social networks. From an ethical point of view, there were violations of the Code of Ethics which stipulates in Article 3.5: “The journalist does not provide the public with morbid details of crimes, accidents, and natural disasters or details of suicide techniques.”

Posts on international issues ranked second in volume (N = 54), and coronavirus was, as in other cases, also an important topic (N = 33) on Facebook. News on the judiciary (N = 6) and corruption (N = 10) were also categories that did not refer directly to the election campaign.

Chart 9. Number of posts per thematic categories between September 21 and 27, 2020 by Jurnal TV



Many of the posts in the category Politicians (N = 29) and Organization of Elections (N = 8) referred to mutual accusations by former Prime Minister Vlad Filat and his former lawyer Igor Popa that appeared in the public space (N = 13).⁶¹ Jurnal TV shared their replies and statements that had initially been published on its web platform on Facebook as well and included lots of details. In addition, candidate Igor Dodon was mentioned in a negative way in 9 of the 29 posts in the same thematic category. Vladimir Plahotniuc and Andrian Candu were mentioned in 3 posts, all with negative tones. Two posts promoted the initiatives and statements of Andrei Nastase regarding amending the constitution, and one post presented the results of opinion polls mentioning that Maia Sandu was projected to lead in the first round of the election.

Regarding the organization of the election, Jurnal TV amplified the messages addressed to the representatives of the European Union by candidates and potential candidates regarding the possibility that Igor Dodon would try to rig the election: “Five candidates for president of the Republic of Moldova—Maia Sandu, Octavian Ticu, Dorin Chirtoaca, Renato Usatii, and Tudor Deliu—made a joint appeal to the international community expressing their concern about Dodon’s attempts to rig the election”⁶² the TV station claimed and provided space for Igor Dodon’s reply as well: “Dodon, about the election fraud: ‘The dog barks, but the caravan moves on.’”⁶³

Jurnal TV also selectively published news items about survey results favorable to one candidate only, in this case those about Maia Sandu’s projected victory. This denotes a strategy of intentionally filtering posts which can represent the outlet’s biased vision on a topic.

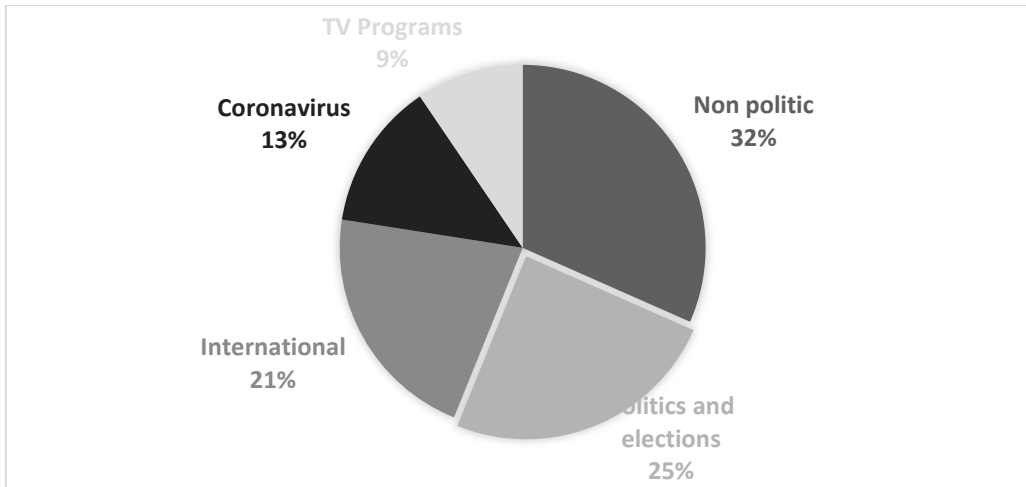
Chart 10 shows the thematic diversity of posts by Jurnal TV and the fact that a quarter of them referred to politics, namely the presidential election. In conclusion, the volume of posts in this category is not sufficient to create a campaign of mass favoritism or denigration of a candidate as was the case on the stations affiliated with Igor Dodon; however, the manner of posting and the tendency to subtly choose an angle for promoting the news reveals certain political preferences of this media outlet.

⁶¹ <https://www.facebook.com/jurnaltv.md/posts/10158454879190450>

⁶² <https://www.facebook.com/jurnaltv.md/posts/10158444156650450>

⁶³ <https://www.facebook.com/jurnaltv.md/posts/10158454810830450>

Chart 10. Proportion of posts per thematic categories and political affiliation by Jurnal TV



Activities of Jurnal TV Journalists

Jurnal TV is the only outlet whose journalists use the social network as a forum for discussing and expressing opinions about politics, geopolitics, society and, during the monitoring period, the election. In total, **19 posts** were made on the personal profiles of the journalists. As can be seen in Table 4, they posted information related to their professional lives: they shared links to news and opinions about the political and geopolitical situation, society, and personal life. Fellow journalists commented and interacted with each other via these posts.

Table 4. Number of posts of Jurnal TV journalists from September 21-27, 2020

No. of posts	Topics
2	Harsh criticism against Igor Dodon
1	Support for Maia Sandu
1	Geopolitics, dependence on Russia
1	Geopolitics, comparing Moldovan politics with that of Romania
1	Elections, Central Electoral Commission, number of polling stations in Russia and applications on paper
2	Justice
1	Society
3	Advertising for the shows they host
3	COVID

3	Personal life
1	Criticism of politician Iurie Rosca

It should be mentioned that the posts referring to Moldovan politics and political actors were critical and sarcastic, except for the post of a journalist who supported the candidacy of Maia Sandu in the presidential election (Screenshot 10).

Toți acei care scuipați acum în Maia Sandu gândiți-vă că după turul întâi o să trebuiască să vă înghițiți scuipăturile înapoi.

👍❤️😂 507

9 comments 153 shares

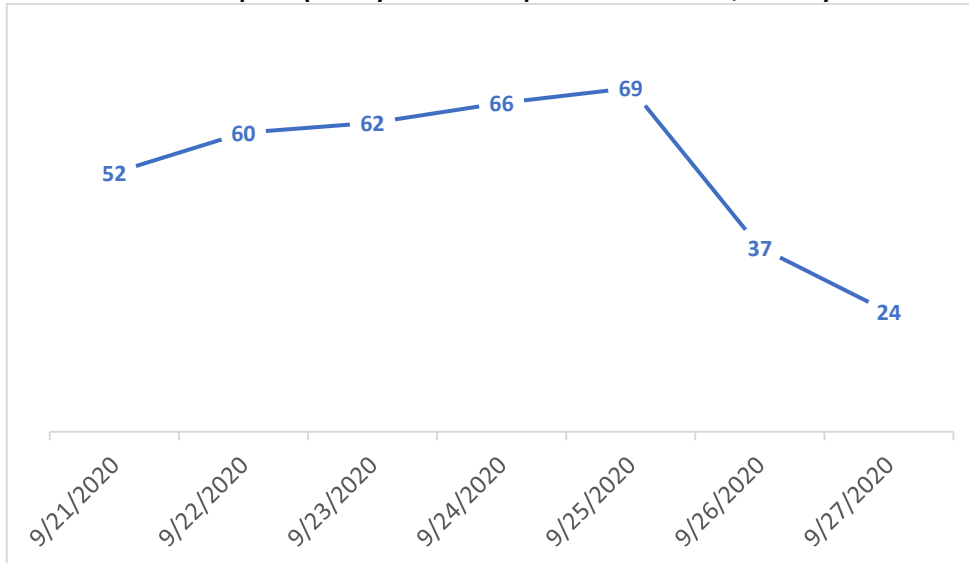
All of you, who are now spitting at Maia Sandu will have to take your spit back after the first round.

Screenshot 10. Message in support for Maia Sandu by a journalist of Jurnal TV

DATA INTERPRETATION. UNIMEDIA.INFO

The **370 posts** published on the Facebook page of the Unimedia.info news portal⁶⁴ had a daily average of 1,010 interactions (likes, comments, and shares) exclusively in Romanian. According to Chart 11, the most posts appeared on September 25. On average, the portal made 51 posts per day without a break for Sunday.

Chart 11. Number of posts per day between September 21 and 27, 2020 by Unimedia.info

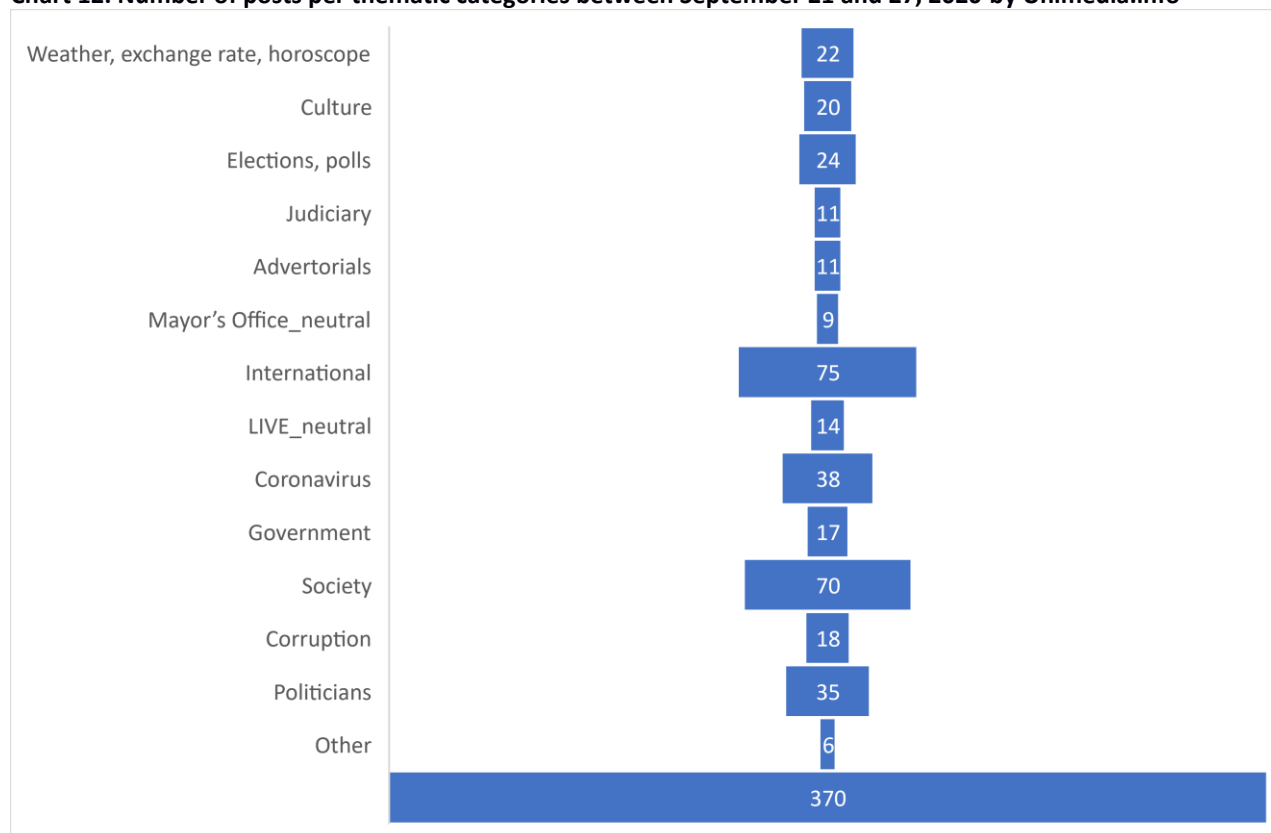


⁶⁴<https://www.facebook.com/unimedia.info>

The variety of these posts was much greater on Unimedia.info (Chart 12) than on Jurnal TV, NTV or Primul în Moldova. As in the case of Jurnal TV, the categories Society (N = 70) and International (N = 75) ranked first in terms of the number of posts. Posts in the thematic categories Judicial System, Corruption, Government and Mayor’s Office were presented in a neutral manner by emphasizing the subject and the actions announced in the news items.

The posts referring to the politicians involved in the electoral race (N = 35) and those that covered the process of the election (N = 24) were focused on the disagreement between Vlad Filat and Igor Popa (N = 12), the scandal involving the teacher from Ocnita, the exchange of remarks between Ion Sturza and Andrei Nastase,⁶⁵ the joint address of candidates and potential candidates to the EU regarding possible election fraud by Igor Dodon and the PSRM’s reaction to this issue.⁶⁶

Chart 12. Number of posts per thematic categories between September 21 and 27, 2020 by Unimedia.info



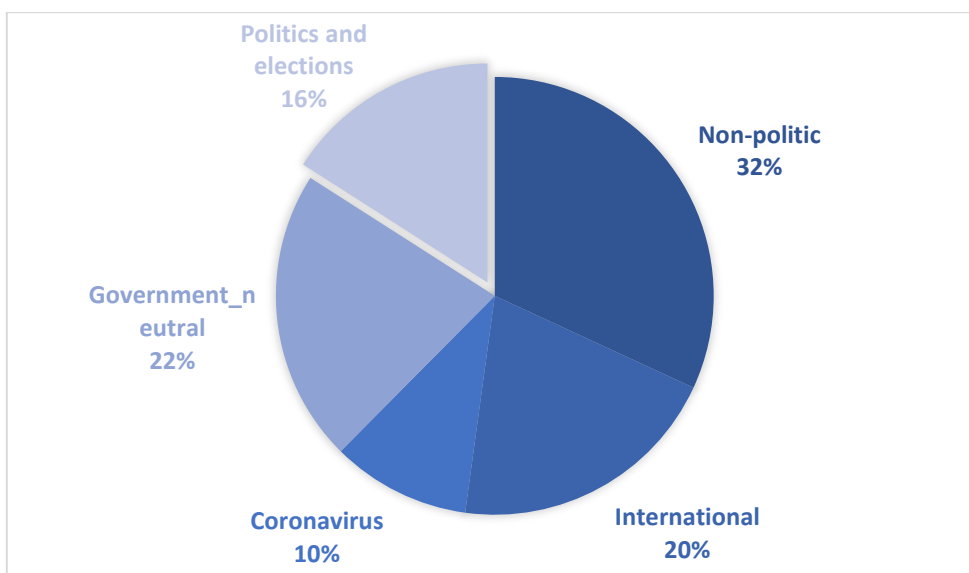
⁶⁵<https://www.facebook.com/unimedia.info/posts/4377077062362828>

⁶⁶<https://www.facebook.com/unimedia.info/posts/4381800928557108>

Although most of the posts were unbiased politically, five posts subtly favored Andrei Nastase by presenting the opinions and political visions of this presidential candidate in a positive manner.

Only 16% of the content posted on the Facebook page of Unimedia.info referred to the election and its organization (Chart 13).

Chart 13. Proportion of posts per thematic categories and political affiliation by Unimedia.info



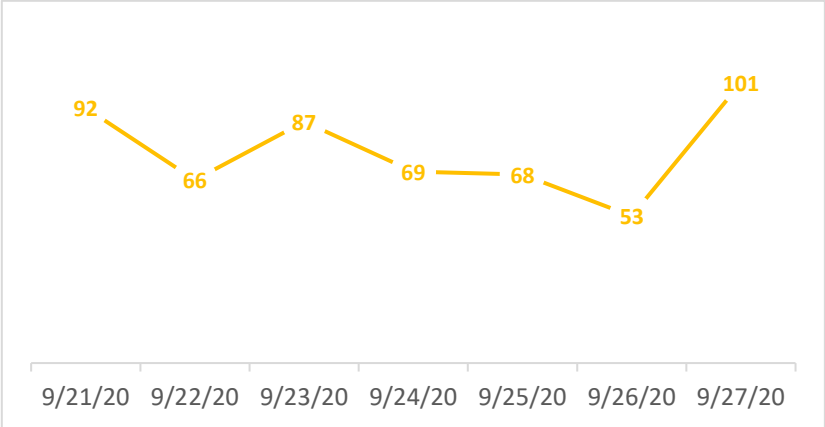
Of the three journalists on the Unimedia.info team whose activities were monitored, only one posted content related to elections during this period. One of two posts made between September 21 and 17 presented potential scenarios for the constitutional court in connection with the electoral process that was from a deontological point of view neutral. Thus, we can say that Unimedia.info largely complied with the provisions of the Journalist's Code of Ethics regarding propaganda and political partisanship.

DATA INTERPRETATION. PUBLIKA.MD

In all, **536 posts** were published between September 21 and 27 on the Facebook page of the Publika.md portal. The daily average of 630 audience interactions with these posts was the lowest among the five media outlets monitored in the study. The outlet publishes posts in Romanian only. According to Chart 14, the greatest number of posts was made on Sunday, September 27. This is explained by the diversity of entertainment shows that the

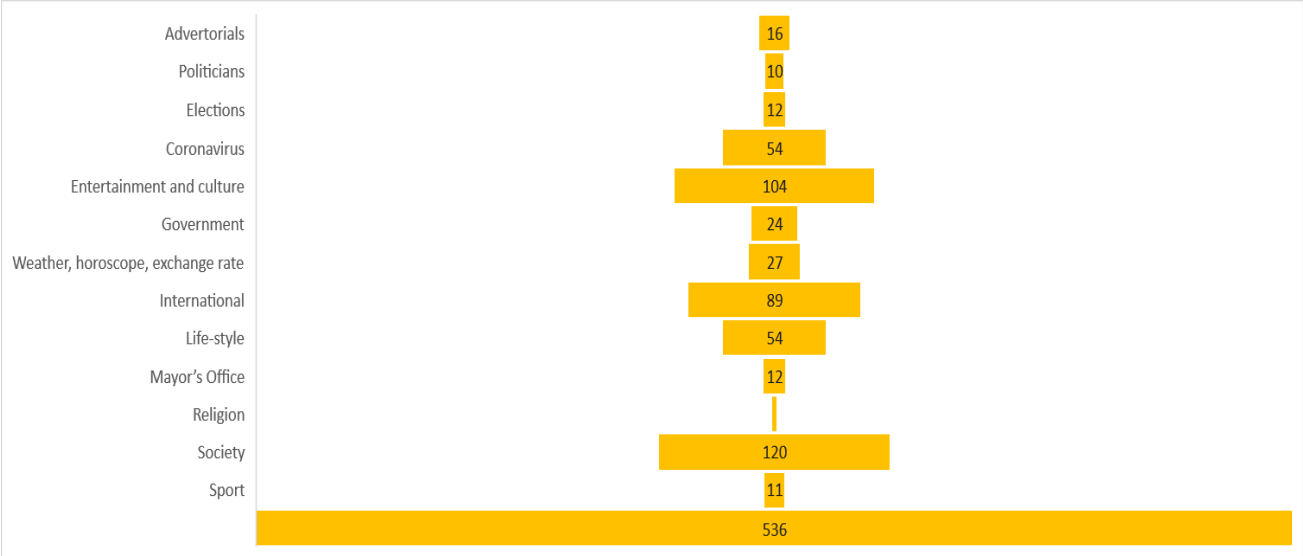
station broadcasts on weekends. On average, the station published 70 posts per day. From the beginning of the month until the end of the monitoring period, there was a decrease in the number of followers (by approximately 150) for the Publika.md Facebook page.

Chart 14. Number of posts per day between September 21 and 27, 2020 by Publika.md



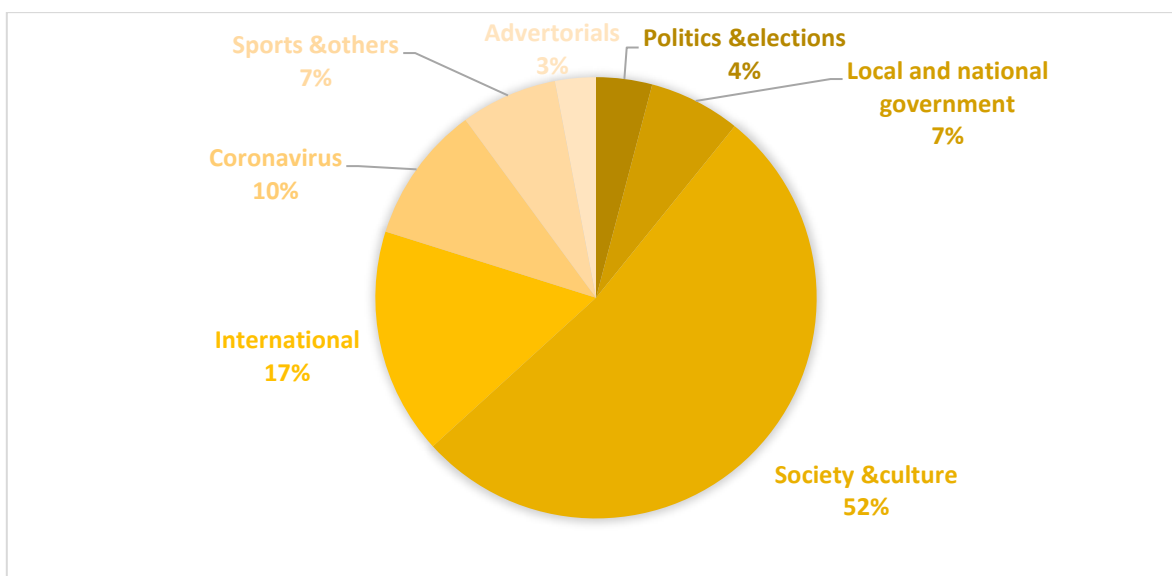
Publika.md had the greatest diversity of posts among the five media outlets monitored (charts 15 and 16) and also had the fewest news items related to the politicians involved in the electoral race (N = 10) and elections (N = 12). The most frequently cited and targeted politician was Igor Dodon (N = 6), and the relevant posts were mostly about the speech he delivered at the UN General Assembly summit celebrating the 75th anniversary of the United Nations that was conducted in online format.

Chart 15. Number of posts per topic category between September 21 and 27, 2020 by Publika.md



The small number of posts in categories related to election is proof of the outlet’s lack of interest in the election. It did not seem to be a priority for Publika.md, something we cannot say about NTV Moldova and Primul în Moldova. The posts on the Publika.md Facebook page complied with the provisions of the code and in Article 1.6.

Chart 15. Proportion of posts per thematic category and political affiliation by Publika.md



Journalists from Publika made only two public posts during this period, both of which were about their personal lives.

CONCLUSION

In the run-up to the election, non-compliance with the general provisions of the Journalist’s Code of Ethics and with **Article 1.6** that specifically prohibits political partisanship and propaganda in favor of a candidate was widespread on social networks. The numerous posts favorable to a candidate or party were the key indicators of a concerted campaign to form a positive image for them. This method was also used to denigrate and attack competitors in favor of those who “pay” for the campaign.

Opinion polls are often used to increase trust in a candidate, and biased interpretations of their results and amplification of their messages on social networks can be a factor in manipulating public opinion before elections.

Monitoring the social network pages of media outlets and journalists is useful for detecting their political affiliations and electoral preferences, as well as for observing the general trends and goals of the respective entities before an election. Social networks are additional tools for amplifying messages that in most cases do not differ from those transmitted through other channels of communication with the public.

As there is still no detailed guide in the Journalist's Code of Ethics in Moldova on the use of social networks by journalism professionals, phenomena such as archiving or deleting posts on the pages of media outlets will continue to occur eventually making monitoring difficult.

Therefore, the Independent Journalism Center recommends the following:

- ⇒ Media outlets and journalists observe deontological rules in their coverage of elections on social networks (Facebook), paying special attention to the provisions of the Moldovan Journalist's Code of Ethics.
- ⇒ The status of social networks in the Journalist's Code of Ethics should be clarified taking into account the opportunities and dangers present in the online environment.
- ⇒ Critical thinking among information consumers on social networks must be developed in order to help them recognize manipulation and disinformation, including trolling.
- ⇒ The Facebook pages of media outlets and journalists should be monitored continuously in the context of events of major importance for the country's democratic processes.