



Early Parliamentary Elections Republic of Moldova 2021

Monitoring of the Election Campaign in Social Media - Preliminary Findings

24 August 2021

Contents

Moldova Early Parliamentary Elections July 2021
Monitoring of Social Media - Preliminary Findings

About this report	3
Preliminary findings	4
Introduction	5
Social media in Moldova	6
The presence of electoral candidates on social media	7
The activity of electoral contestants and politicians on monitored social networks	8
Spending on Facebook ads during the electoral campaign	30
Specific narratives used by electoral contestants	32
Misleading or deceptive content used during the electoral campaign	33
Network mapping (Facebook)	40
Methodology	41
About the authors	45

About this report

The information environment has changed significantly in recent years, particularly as a result of the increased use of social media networks. This technological and social shift has resulted in substantial changes in how political actors and voters interact and in how the media influences the democratic decision-making process, notably during elections. While television in Moldova remains the most popular source of political information, it is generally far from balanced and objective, given that many national TV channels are associated with political actors. The misuse of television for political purposes may have contributed to the growing importance of social media networks during elections. For a certain segment of Moldovan society, particularly younger people, social media networks have already overtaken television as the main source of political information.

While social media networks have been quick to supplement or replace traditional media in bringing information about political contestants to various audiences, their contribution to upholding the integrity of electoral campaigns is controversial. Notwithstanding some positive aspects such as expanding opportunities to receive and impart information, social media networks have contributed to a general lack of a meaningful debate and made it possible for disinformation to spread faster to larger audiences and at less cost. Those behind such disinformation efforts include coordinated actors (influence campaigns and Internet trolls) who spread inauthentic content (junk news and deep fakes) aimed at undermining the reputation of candidates, discouraging or eliminating voters and casting a shadow over the integrity of the electoral process.

It is therefore important that these negative trends be properly monitored so that efforts to counter them are based on solid research. It is in this context that Mediapoint and MEMO 98, with the support of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), analysed the electoral campaign for the 11 July parliamentary elections in Moldova on five social media platforms—Facebook, Instagram, Odnoklassniki, Telegram and YouTube. The monitoring focused on the social media activity of 23 electoral contestants including two electoral blocs and one independent candidate. In addition, the monitoring looked at the activity of 17 leaders of parties registered for the election. It also analysed various narratives identified throughout the campaign across different platforms. Data analysis and network mapping tools were used to find dominant flows of information in public groups on Facebook and to identify how the content shared by these groups reflected and promoted certain geopolitical sentiments. More detailed analysis of the findings of the monitoring will be presented in the final report.

Preliminary findings

Moldova Early Parliamentary Elections July 2021 Monitoring of Social Media - Preliminary Findings

- The monitoring focused on 20 parties, two blocs and one independent candidate as well as selected party leaders. It revealed that social media networks were used as communication platforms, with contestants mainly posting about their campaign activities, such as meetings with voters, or information about their platforms.
- Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Moldova, and it was used by all registered contestants. The popularity of Odnoklassniki has decreased in recent years, and it was used by only four parties and nine political leaders.
- Between 12 June and 9 July, a total of 3,392 posts were published on contestants' Facebook pages. By comparison, parties published only 456 posts on their Odnoklassniki pages.
- There were a total of 1.82 million interactions in relation to posts published by contestants on their Facebook pages, whereas the posts published by the leaders of these parties received 1.09 million interactions.
- As much as 57 per cent of these interactions were accumulated by the Partidul Democrația Acasă, followed by Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate with 20 per cent of all interactions.
- Of the monitored party leaders, Renato Usatîi received the largest number of interactions, followed by Vlad Bilețchi and Andrei Năstase.
- The posts from the Partidul Democrația Acasă received the largest number of likes, followed by Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate and Partidul Acțiunii Comune – Congresul Civic.
- On Odnoklassniki, the number of interactions—only 2,818—with posts from contestants was considerably smaller than with those on Facebook. The posts that political leaders published on Odnoklassniki received as many as 67,724 interactions, with Igor Dodon receiving 34,957 interactions; Alexandr Kalinin, 13,048; and Renato Usatîi, 10,238.
- Partidul Acțiunii Comune – Congresul Civic received the largest number of interactions on Instagram, followed by Partidul Acasă Construim Europa and Partidul Șor. When it comes to political leaders, Usatîi received the bulk of the interactions, followed by Dodon and Șor.
- While more than half of the electoral contestants have a YouTube channel, only 10 of them used it during the elections. The Partidul Democrația Acasă received the largest number of views, followed by Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate. Only four party leaders used their YouTube channels during the campaign, with Usatîi receiving the largest number of views, followed by Dodon.
- Only about half of the contestants used paid advertising on Facebook and Instagram, spending some EUR 50,457 on sponsored posts about social issues, elections or politics. As for political leaders, they spent some EUR 30,200, with Renato Usatîi and Mariana Durleșteanu paying EUR 13,980 and EUR 5,334, respectively.
- The most frequently addressed topic on the monitored Facebook pages of parties and politicians was about who should be blamed for Moldova's stagnation, with posts suggesting that thieves and oligarchs were responsible for halting the country's development.
- The monitoring of narratives showed that the pro-European parties maintained that Moldova would become a developed country only in the European Union, whereas the dominant narrative of those parties advancing a pro-Russian orientation was that foreign countries were interfering in Moldovan politics.
- Similar to the 2020 election, the issue of a union with Romania was also frequently addressed, with the unionist parties promoting the idea that EU integration is possible only through unification with Romania.
- The monitoring of narratives on Odnoklassniki showed that they were mainly pro-Russian. In particular, the narrative that Russia had always helped Moldova was pursued most often by the leader of the Partidul Socialiștilor din Moldova, Dodon.
- The monitoring also focused on Telegram, including anonymous channels that pushed anti-Western narratives, including accusations that both the EU and the United States were meddling in Moldova's internal affairs.
- Incumbent President Maia Sandu and the Action and Solidarity Party, which she had chaired in the past, were targets of a smear campaign.
- As many as 53,632 posts were published in the monitored Facebook groups, generating 297,551 comments.

Introduction

More than
3.2 million
citizens were eligible to vote
in these elections.

On 28 April 2021 President Sandu dissolved the Parliament and called for early parliamentary elections on 11 July 2021. Against the backdrop of long-standing political polarization and government instability, this decision came after the resignation of the Government of Prime Minister Ion Chicu on 23 December 2020 and a prolonged period of disagreement between the President and the parliamentary majority regarding a candidate for prime minister. The Constitutional Court found the dissolution of the Parliament to be in line with the Constitution and at the same time annulled the state of emergency due to COVID-19, thus allowing the early elections to take place. Twenty-three electoral contestants were registered, including 20 political parties, two electoral blocs and one independent candidate.

The monitoring focused on contestants' pages on five social media networks. While television remains the main source of political information, there has been an increase in politicians' use of social media networks as a platform to communicate their message to the electorate. The lack of regulation of online campaigning raises concerns about the transparency of and accountability for the actions of political contestants as well as the responsibility of platforms to uphold the integrity of the electoral process and to counter disinformation.

In recent years, the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation, especially through social media networks, and their fundamental impact on electoral integrity have become a matter of global interest and concern—also in Moldova, particularly given its geopolitical location.

Between 12 June and 9 July 2021, Mediapoint, a Moldovan new media organization, and MEMO 98, a Slovak non-profit specialist media-monitoring organization, monitored social media in the run-up to the 11 July parliamentary elections in Moldova. The main purpose of the monitoring was to determine the impact of social media on the electoral campaign and the extent to which social media serve as a platform to provide information that voters need in their decision-making. Using CrowdTangle, which tracks public posts on Facebook and Instagram, as well as NewsWhip and other tools, the monitoring also focused on issues and narratives discussed and used in the context of elections.¹ From a wider perspective, the monitoring assessed the overall role of social media in the elections and their potential impact on election integrity, particularly the potential dissemination of disinformation. Following this preliminary report, Mediapoint and MEMO 98 will issue a final report providing more in-depth analysis of the monitoring results. The final report will also include conclusions on monitoring the day of silence and election day.

¹ CrowdTangle (a social media analytics tool owned by Facebook) 'tracks public posts on Facebook, Instagram and Reddit, made by public accounts or groups. The tool does not track every public account and does not track private profiles or groups, so this data is not representative of performance across the entire platform. The numbers shown in this report reflect public interactions (likes, reactions, comments, shares and three second views), but do not include reach or referral traffic. It does not include paid ads unless those ads began as organic, non-paid posts that were subsequently "boosted" using Facebook's advertising tools. Because the system doesn't distinguish this type of paid content, note that some high-performing content may have had paid distribution. CrowdTangle also does not track posts made visible only to specific groups of followers.

Social Media in Moldova

The presence of Moldovan citizens on social networks has gradually increased in recent years, with some notable changes, such as the migration of users from the Russian platforms Odnoklassniki and Vkontakte to Facebook and Instagram.

Facebook remains the most popular social network in Moldova, with about 1.6 million registered users, followed by Instagram, which currently has 0.96 million active accounts, according to Facebook Ads Manager.

Some 120,000 new users have joined Instagram since the November 2020 presidential election in Moldova. While there may be different reasons for this increase, Facebook has offered a variety of new services to their users, including an option to create an account on the Instagram photo and video sharing network.

²National Regulatory Agency for Electronic Communications and Information Technology, 'Rata de penetrare a serviciilor de acces la Internet mobil în bandă largă a depășit pragul de 90 la sută' [Mobile Broadband Internet Penetration Rate Has Exceeded 90 Per Cent], 17 June 2021, <https://www.anrceti.md/news_170621>, accessed 13 July 2021.



In June 2021 Odnoklassniki had some 305,150 registered users, and its popularity was decreasing. The platform saw a drop of about 67,000 users in just seven months following the November 2020 presidential election. Similar to Odnoklassniki, Vkontakte has experienced a decreasing trend - a drop of some 69,582 users between November 2020 and June 2021.

At the same time, Telegram and TikTok have been gaining in popularity in Moldova (as well as globally). Telegram is used by various categories of users, including in various age groups. On the other hand, TikTok has attracted mainly a young audience, a trend that Mediapoint and MEMO 98 identified already during the 2020 presidential election. At the same time, TikTok is now also being used more widely by adults. The monitoring indicated that seven contestants had used it during the campaign as a platform to promote their video messages.

The use of social networks is conditioned by the penetration rate of mobile Internet services. In June 2021 the number of mobile Internet users exceeded **2.38 million**. The penetration rate of these services per 100 inhabitants reached 90.4%, according to the data from the National Regulatory Agency for Electronic Communications and Information Technology ². The increase in the number of mobile Internet users facilitates the use of social media networks, which are accessed mainly from mobile devices.

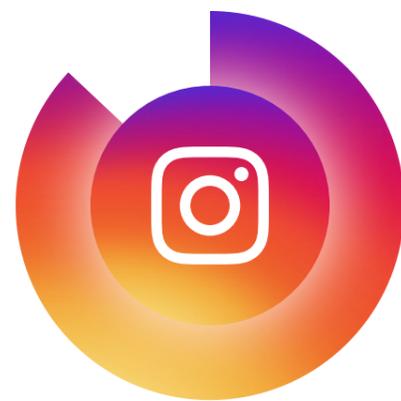
The presence of electoral contestants on social media

In these elections, contestants used several social networks to communicate with voters. All contestants had a public Facebook page and used it during the campaign. While these pages were the main communication platform for some parties and candidates, others also relied on other means of online and traditional campaigning.



100%

all 23 electoral contestants had a Facebook page



87%

of the electoral contestants had an Instagram account



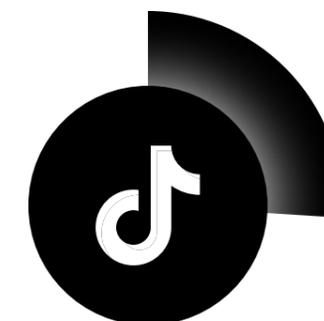
61%

of the electoral contestants had a YouTube account



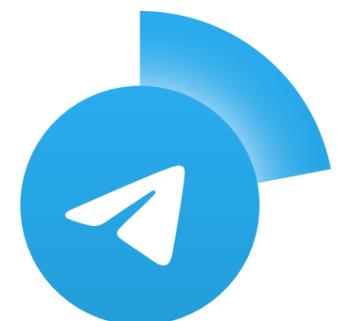
35%

of the electoral contestants had an Odnoklassniki account



26%

of the electoral contestants had a TikTok account



22%

of the electoral contestants had a Telegram account



**The activity of electoral
contestants and politicians
on monitored social
networks**

Summary of the activity of electoral contestants and party leaders on Facebook

Moldova Early Parliamentary Elections July 2021
Monitoring of Social Media - Preliminary Findings

Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Moldova, and most contestants used it intensively during the elections. It was the most used of the five monitored social media platforms. The registered parties, blocs and independent candidates published 3,392 posts between 12 June and 9 July 2021. By comparison, monitored politicians published 1,551 posts in the same period.

The qualitative monitoring revealed that, while political parties generally used measured language on their official pages, party leaders were more aggressive. Information about campaign activities, meetings with voters, campaign messages and promises was generally published on Facebook pages without details on how those promises would be fulfilled. The monitoring found that, in total, there were as many as 2,485,717 interactions on the monitored Facebook accounts during the entire monitoring period, from which political parties received 1.82 million interactions; and political leaders, 1.09 million interactions. Of the parties, the Partidul Democrația Acasă received the largest number of interactions (1,045,215), followed by Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate (372,119) and Partidul Acțiunii Comune – Congresul Civic (58,811 interactions). Among party leaders, Usatîi received the largest number of interactions (330,173), followed by Vlad Bilețchi (319,018) and Năstase (96,115).



Number of posts published on the Facebook pages of electoral contestants and parties*

3,392

posts published in the election campaign (12 June - 9 July, 2021)



	Partidul Nostru	327
	Partidul Acțiunii Comune - Congresul Civic	286
	Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate	258
	Partidul Acasă Construim Europa	250
	Partidul Democrat din Moldova	235
	Blocul electoral al Comuniștilor și Socialiștilor	226
	Veaceslav Valico	216
	Partidul Democrația Acasă	207
	Partidul Șor	170
	Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr	158
	Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova	148
	Partidul Unității Naționale	124
	Partidul Verde Ecologist	110
	Partidul Dezvoltării și Consolidării Moldovei	110
	Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor	105
	Partidul Comuniștilor din Republica Moldova	93
	Partidul Oamenilor Muncii	84
	Partidul Puterea Oamenilor	78
	Partidul Legii și Dreptății	77
	Partidul Schimbării	49
	Partidul Regiunilor	43
	Partidul NOI	38

*In addition to the pages of electoral contestants we monitored the pages of parties included in the electoral blocks

Number of posts published on the Facebook pages of party leaders

1,551

posts published in the
election campaign
(12 June - 9 July, 2021)

	Renato Usatî	290
	Gheorghe Cavcaliuc	216
	Octavian Țîcu	164
	Igor Dodon	141
	Pavel Filip	125
	Andrei Năstase	124
	Mariana Durleșteanu	89
	Vlad Bilețchi	80
	Ion Chicu	78
	Ruslan Codreanu	77
	Ilan Șor	66
	Vitalie Marinuța	46
	Igor Grosu	40
	Vasile Costiuc	11
	Serghei Toma	4

Number of interactions to posts of electoral contestants and parties* on Facebook

Moldova Early Parliamentary Elections July 2021
Monitoring of Social Media - Preliminary Findings

1.82 million

interactions in the
election campaign
(12 June - 9 July, 2021)

*In addition to the pages of electoral contestants we monitored the pages of parties included in the electoral blocks

	Partidul Democrația Acasă	1,045,215
	Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate	372,119
	Partidul Acțiunii Comune - Congresul Civic	58,801
	Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr	49,349
	Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor	44,853
	Partidul Schimbării	40,795
	Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova	33,009
	Partidul Acasă Construim Europa	30,253
	Veaceslav Valico	26,986
	Partidul Dezvoltării și Consolidării Moldovei	25,986
	Partidul Democrat din Moldova	23,831
	Blocul electoral al Comuniștilor și Socialiștilor	14,876
	Partidul Șor	14,607
	Partidul Nostru	12,778
	Partidul Unității Naționale	9,050
	Partidul Oamenilor Muncii	7,788
	Partidul Puterea Oamenilor	5,288
	Partidul Verde Ecologist	3,733
	Partidul Legii și Dreptății	1,861
	Partidul Comuniștilor din Republica Moldova	1,753
	Partidul NOI	896
	Partidul Regiunilor	83

Number of interactions to posts of party leaders on Facebook

Moldova Early Parliamentary Elections July 2021
Monitoring of Social Media - Preliminary Findings

1.09 million

interactions in the election campaign (12 June - 9 July, 2021)

	Renato Usatî	330,173
	Vlad Bilețchi	319,018
	Andrei Năstase	96,115
	Igor Dodon	93,191
	Gheorghe Cavaliuc	66,814
	Ilan Șor	54,922
	Octavian Țîcu	35,611
	Mariana Durleșteanu	28,173
	Igor Grosu	25,874
	Pavel Filip	16,929
	Ruslan Codreanu	11,188
	Ion Chicu	10,206
	Vasile Costiuc	2,263
	Vitalie Marinuța	1,465
	Serghei Toma	4

Number of likes to posts of electoral contestants and parties* on Facebook



1 million

likes in the
election campaign
(12 June - 9 July, 2021)

*In addition to the pages of electoral contestants we monitored the pages of parties included in the electoral blocks

	Partidul Democrația Acasă	553,348
	Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate	239,329
	Partidul Acțiunii Comune - Congresul Civic	30,555
	Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr	26,550
	Partidul Schimbării	25,835
	Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor	18,586
	Partidul Dezvoltării și Consolidării Moldovei	15,162
	Partidul Democrat din Moldova	13,914
	Veaceslav Valico	12,753
	Partidul Acasă Construim Europa	9,881
	Partidul Șor	9,184
	Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova	8,374
	Blocul electoral al Comuniștilor și Socialiștilor	6,795
	Partidul Nostru	6,423
	Partidul Unității Naționale	5,211
	Partidul Puterea Oamenilor	3,526
	Partidul Oamenilor Muncii	2,042
	Partidul Verde Ecologist	1,709
	Partidul Legii și Dreptății	1,258
	Partidul Politic NOI	608
	Partidul Comuniștilor din Republica Moldova	567
	Partidul Regiunilor	54

Number of likes to posts of party leaders on Facebook



0.57 million

likes in the
election campaign
(12 June - 9 July, 2021)

	Renato Usatî	196,816
	Vlad Bilețchi	122,509
	Igor Dodon	58,980
	Andrei Năstase	49,133
	Ilan Șor	31,553
	Octavian Țîcu	25,371
	Gheorghe Cavcaliuc	24,276
	Igor Grosu	18,181
	Mariana Durleșteanu	17,247
	Pavel Filip	10,511
	Ruslan Codreanu	8,987
	Ion Chicu	7,072
	Vasile Costiuc	1,155
	Vitalie Marinuța	1,020
	Serghei Toma	4

Summary of the activity of electoral contestants and party leaders on Instagram

Moldova Early Parliamentary Elections July 2021
Monitoring of Social Media - Preliminary Findings



Instagram has not yet been used as intensively for online campaigning in Moldova as it has in some other countries. While 10 parties posted photos and video content on their Instagram accounts, they received a total of only 4,437 interactions. The most active party was the Partidul Acțiunii Comune – Congresul Civic, which published 84 posts, followed by the Partidul Acasă Construim Europa (78 posts) and the Partidul Șor (51 posts).

By contrast, party leaders were more active, publishing 499 posts, which generated over 160,000 interactions. Usatîi published the largest number of posts (228) and received as many as 99,576 interactions.

When it comes to comments, only 115 comments were published through the accounts of parties, while as many as 3,960 were published through the accounts of party leaders.

Number of posts published on the Instagram accounts of electoral contestants and parties*



306 posts

published by parties on Instagram (12 June - 9 July, 2021)

	Partidul Acțiunii Comune - Congresul Civic	84
	Partidul Acasă Construim Europa	78
	Partidul Șor	51
	Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr	39
	Partidul Patrioții Moldovei	20
	Partidul Oamenilor Muncii	9
	Partidul Unității Naționale	9
	Partidul Verde Ecologist	7
	Partidul Schimbării	5
	Partidul Nostru	2
	Partidul Dezvoltării și Consolidării Moldovei	2

*In addition to the pages of electoral contestants we monitored the pages of parties included in the electoral blocks

Number of posts published on the Instagram accounts of party leaders



499 posts

published by political leaders
on Instagram
(12 June - 9 July, 2021)

	Renato Usatî	228
	Ilan Şor	83
	Octavian Țîcu	62
	Alexandr Kalinin	45
	Igor Dodon	44
	Vasile Costiuc	16
	Ruslan Codreanu	8
	Igor Grosu	7
	Gheorghe Cavcaliuc	6

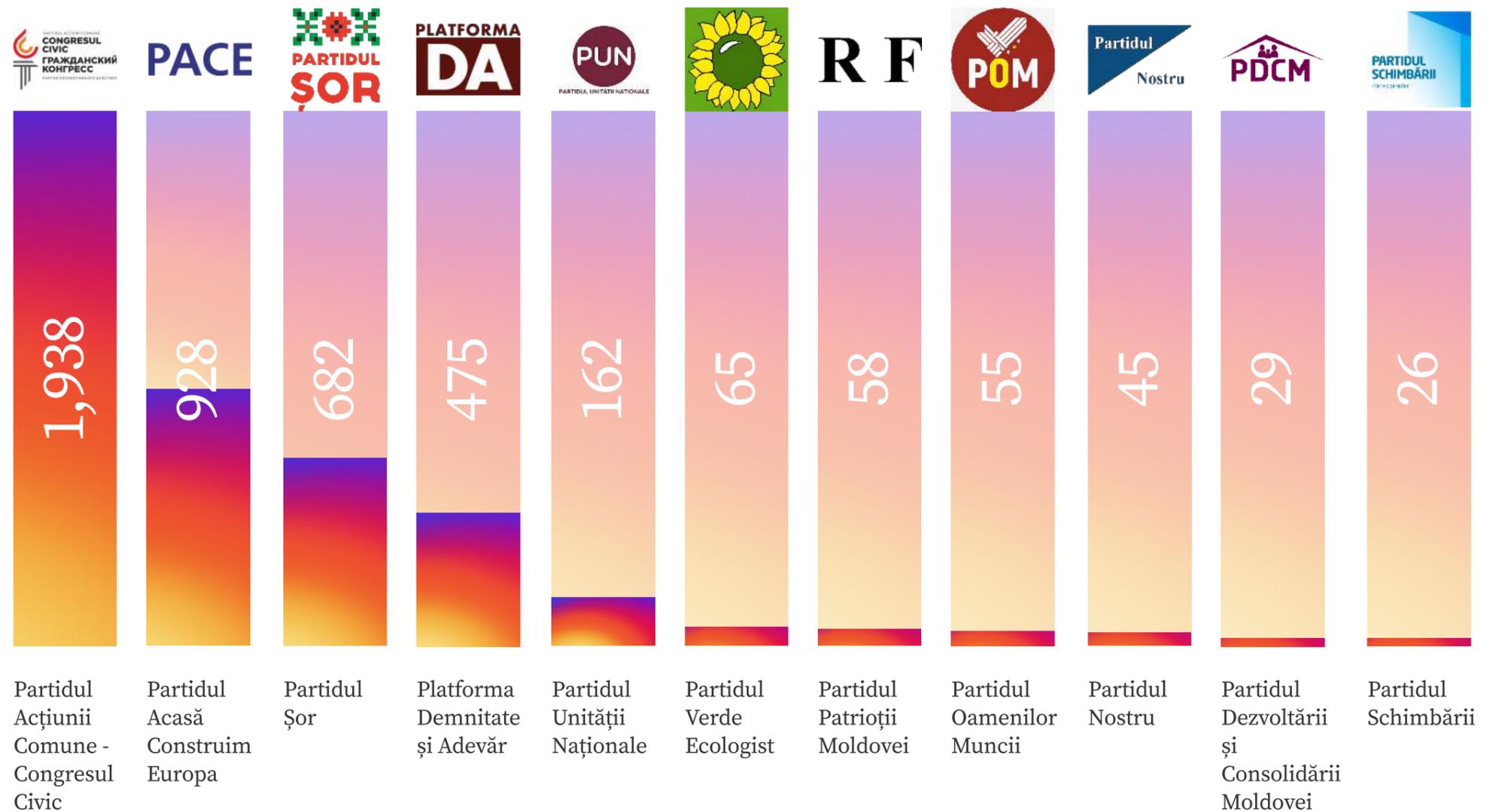
Number of interactions

to posts of electoral contestants and parties*

on Instagram

(12 June - 9 July, 2021)

Moldova Early Parliamentary Elections July 2021
Monitoring of Social Media - Preliminary Findings



*In addition to the pages of electoral contestants we monitored the pages of parties included in the electoral blocks

Number of interactions to posts of party leaders on Instagram

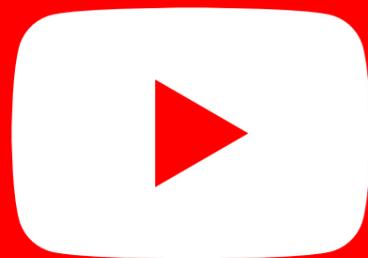
(12 June - 9 July, 2021)

Moldova Early Parliamentary Elections July 2021
Monitoring of Social Media - Preliminary Findings



Summary of the activity of electoral contestants and party leaders on YouTube

Moldova Early Parliamentary Elections July 2021
Monitoring of Social Media - Preliminary Findings



In this election campaign, 10 contestants used YouTube. They posted a total of 372 videos on their channels, which received some 408,391 views. The Democrația Acasă party received the largest number of views during the campaign (247,412), followed by the Blocul electoral al Comuniștilor și Socialiștilor (89,825).

By contrast, only four party leaders used YouTube - Usatîi, Dodon, Șor and Kalinin. They posted a total of 210 videos on their channels, with Usatîi posting the largest number of them (127) and obtaining the most views (393,982).

Dodon received some 48,000 views, which was fewer than in the presidential election campaign.

Number of videos and views on the YouTube channels of electoral contestants and parties*



Moldova Early Parliamentary Elections July 2021
Monitoring of Social Media - Preliminary Findings

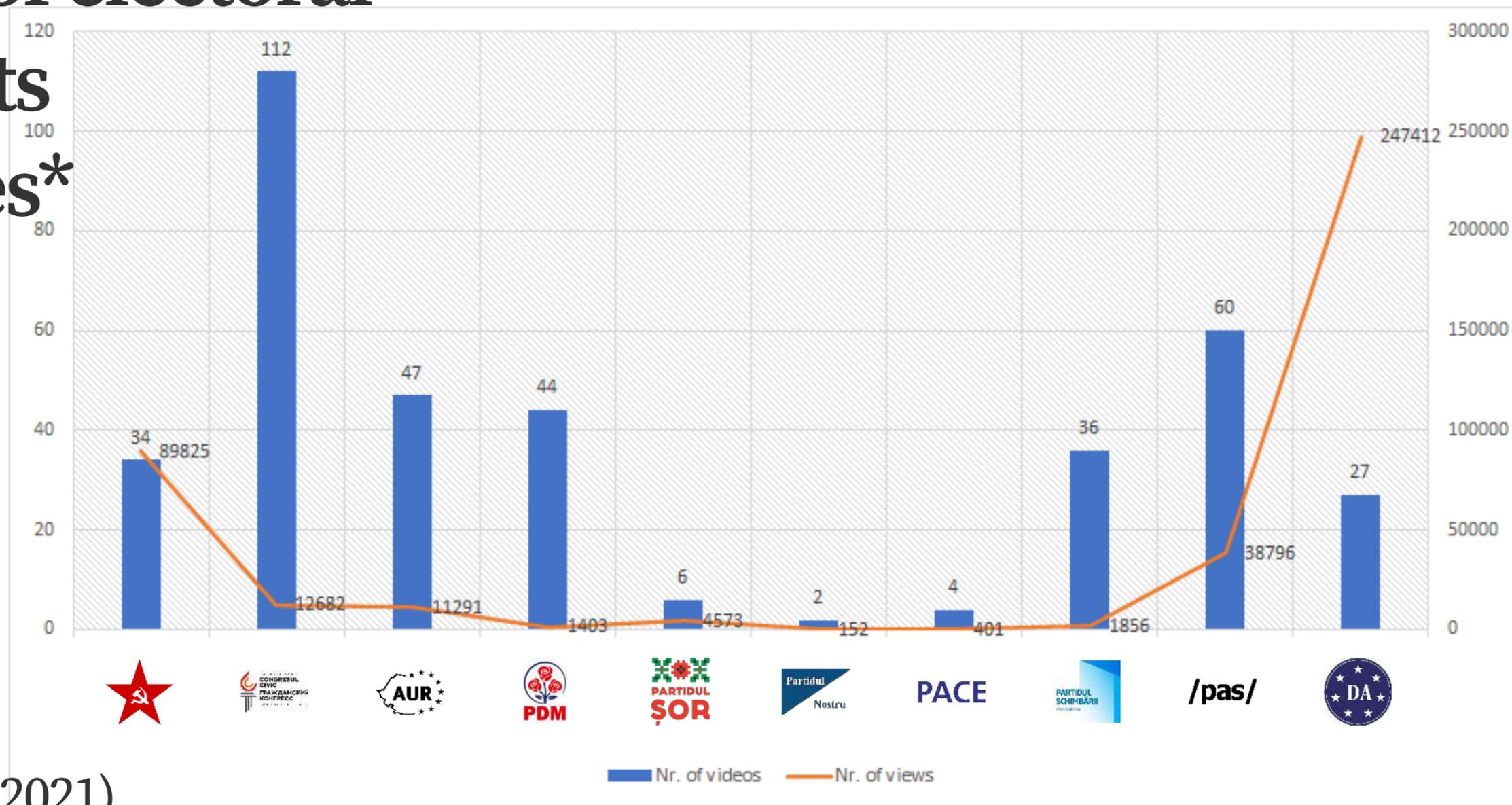
contestants and parties*

372 videos

have been uploaded to Youtube by electoral contestants and got

408,391 views

(12 June - 9 July, 2021)

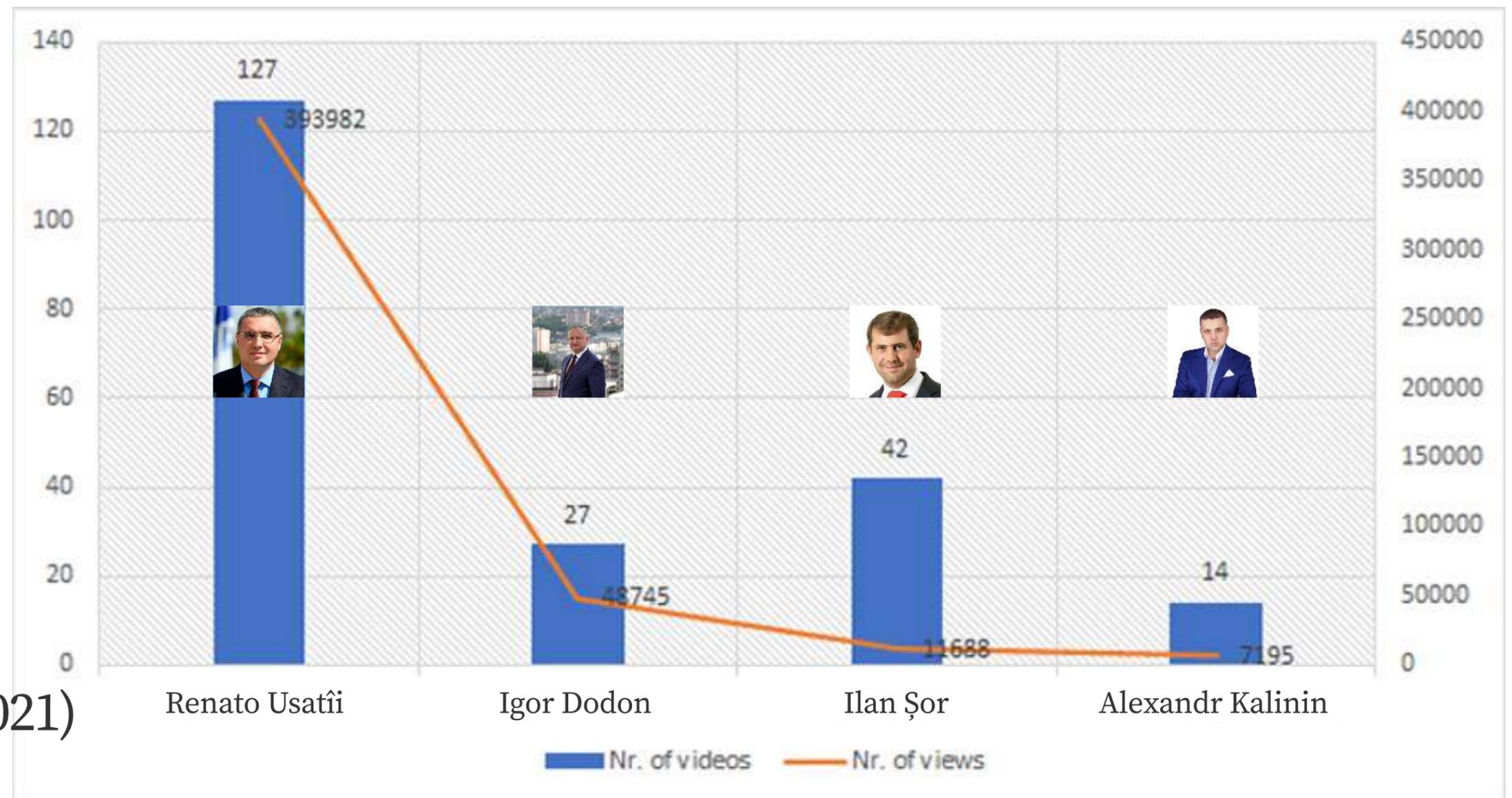


*In addition to the pages of electoral contestants we monitored the pages of parties included in the electoral blocks

Number of videos and views on the YouTube channels of party leaders



Moldova Early Parliamentary Elections July 2021
Monitoring of Social Media - Preliminary Findings



(12 June - 9 July, 2021)

Summary of the activity of electoral contestants and party leaders on Odnoklassniki

Moldova Early Parliamentary Elections July 2021
Monitoring of Social Media - Preliminary Findings



The monitoring of Odnoklassniki showed that it was popular among pro-Russian parties. In total, only four parties and six political leaders used this platform during the elections, including the Partidul Șor, Partidul Regiunilor, Partidul Nostru (component of the Blocul electoral Renato Usatîi) and the Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova (component of the Blocul electoral al Comuniștilor și Socialiștilor). They published a total of 456 posts during the monitoring period. By comparison, the leaders of these parties, including Usatîi, Costiuc, Dodon, Kalinin, Șor and Țicu, published 501 posts. When it comes to interactions, Dodon received the most, followed by Kalinin and Usatîi.

While on Odnoklassniki most monitored actors republished content published on other networks, there was a notable emphasis on pro-Russian rhetoric, including narratives such as that Russia was constantly helping Moldova. Parties and blocs and their leaders generated a total of 70,542 interactions.

Number of posts published on the Odnoklassniki pages of electoral contestants and parties*



456 posts

published published by parties
on Odnoklassniki
(12 June - 9 July, 2021)

*In addition to the pages of electoral contestants we monitored the pages of parties included in the electoral blocks



Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova

208



Partidul Nostru

128



Partidul Regiunilor

71



Partidul Șor

49

Number of posts published on the Odnoklassniki pages of party leaders



501 posts

published by political leaders
on Odnoklassniki
(12 June - 9 July, 2021)

	Renato Usatî	203
	Igor Dodon	127
	Alexandr Kalinin	63
	Ilan Şor	59
	Vasile Costiuc	47
	Octavian Țîcu	2

Number of interactions to posts of electoral contestants and parties* on Odnoklassniki



2,818

interactions in the
election campaign
(12 June - 9 July, 2021)



Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova

1,337



Partidul Nostru

889



Partidul Șor

540



Partidul Regiunilor

52

*In addition to the pages of electoral contestants we monitored the pages of parties included in the electoral blocks

Number of interactions to posts of party leaders on Odnoklassniki

Moldova Early Parliamentary Elections July 2021
Monitoring of Social Media - Preliminary Findings



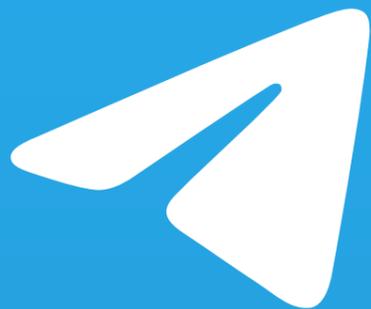
67,724

interactions in the
election campaign
(12 June - 9 July, 2021)

	Igor Dodon	34,957
	Alexandr Kalinin	13,048
	Renato Usatîi	10,238
	Vasile Costiuc	7,313
	Ilan Şor	2,098
	Octavian Țîcu	70

Summary of the activity of electoral contestants and party leaders on Telegram

Moldova Early Parliamentary Elections July 2021
Monitoring of Social Media - Preliminary Findings



Only four parties and two political leaders used Telegram to communicate with voters during the campaign.

Candidates published photos from meetings with voters, campaign videos and presentations of their election platforms. Unlike other social media platforms, Telegram users who are subscribed to a channel receive a notification when a new post is published.

The most active political party on Telegram was Partidul Acțiunii Comune – Congresul Civic, with 183 published posts, which generated 34,120 views.

Spending on Facebook ads during the electoral campaign



Similar to 2020, tracking paid online campaigning on Facebook and Instagram was possible thanks to the availability of Facebook's Ad Library. Paid advertising allows ad creators to reach 1.8 million users in the Republic of Moldova, of which 1.6 million citizens have the right to vote. This includes promotion on Facebook, Instagram but also other tools for promotion offered by these two platforms.

Former Prime Minister Chicu's Partidul Dezvoltării și Consolidării Moldovei invested the most in Facebook advertising, spending EUR 16,422, followed by the Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate with EUR 9,988, and Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor with EUR 5,523.

The politicians who focused their electoral campaign on their personal pages and those who spent the most on advertising were Usatîi, Durleșteanu, Șor, Dodon and Cavaliuc.

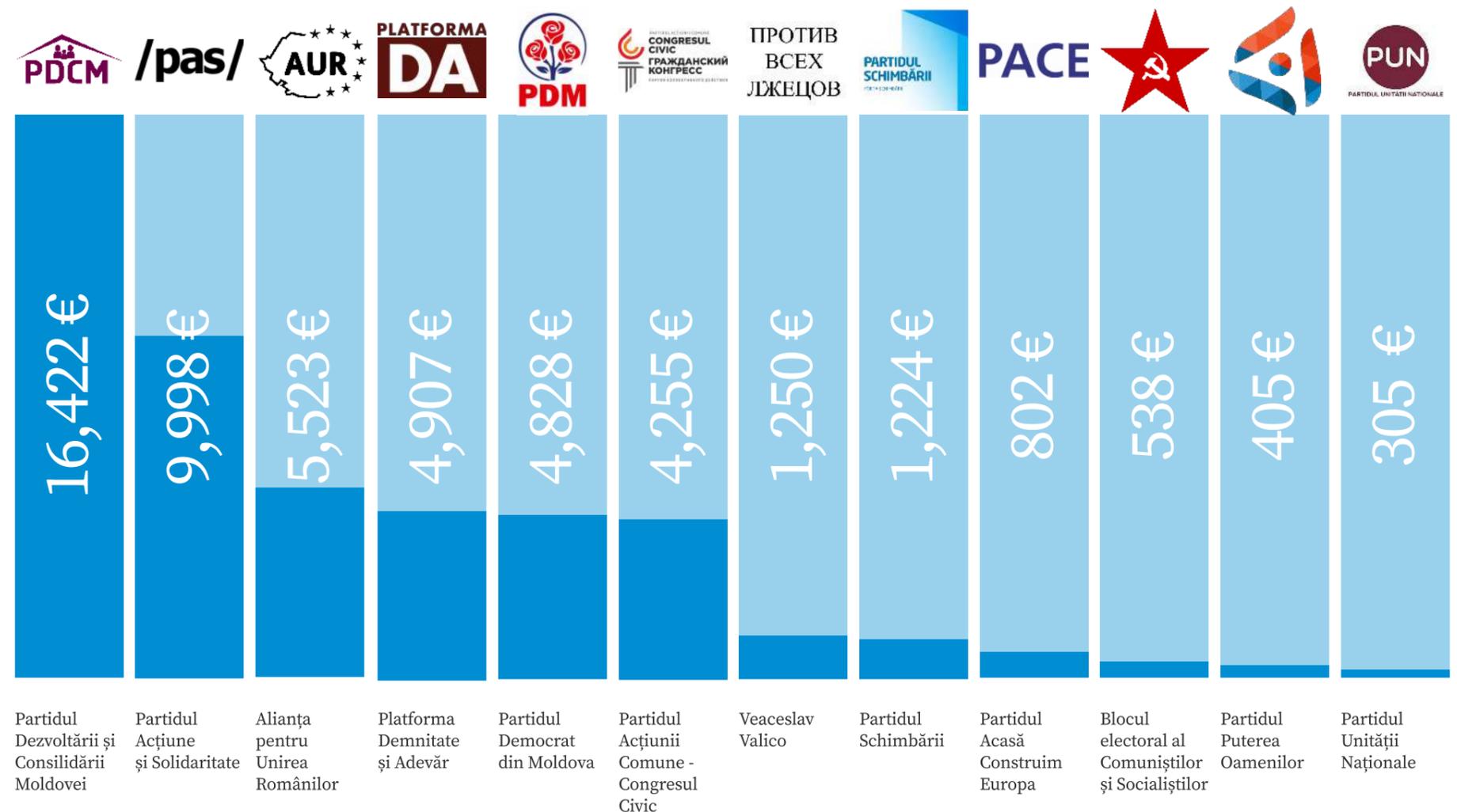
Spending on Facebook ads during the electoral campaign (€)

Moldova Early Parliamentary Elections July 2021
Monitoring of Social Media - Preliminary Findings

12 electoral contestants used advertising in the Facebook Ads network. Other competitors who are not on this list did not spend financial resources for sponsored promotion on Facebook and Instagram.

50,457 €

were spent by electoral contestants for Facebook Ads during the campaign (12 June - 9 July, 2021)



Specific narratives used by electoral contestants

While monitoring the pages of parties and blocs and of party leaders, the monitors looked both at the number of posts and interactions on Facebook and Odnoklassniki and the type of narratives used in the posts. A predefined list of narratives (see the 'Methodology' section of this report) was created at the outset of the project and subsequently used to identify the extent to which those narratives appeared in posts.

Political parties and their leaders mostly used social media networks to discuss their platforms and mobilize voters. They mainly focused on social and economic issues, European integration, Moldova's evolution since gaining independence, who is to blame for the country's problems and failures, and also the activity of international partners in the country.

Based on an analysis of posts published on the Facebook pages of political parties and their leaders, the most frequently addressed topic was that of who is to be blamed for Moldova's stagnation. The contestants claimed most often that thieves and oligarchs who had come to power were responsible for halting the country's development.

As in past campaigns, the right and centre-right parties emphasized the importance of Moldova's European integration, stressing that Moldova would become a developed country only in the European Union. The pro-Russian parties advanced a counter-narrative, stressing that foreign countries were interfering in Moldova's internal affairs and thus undermining the country's interests.

Various electoral contestants addressed issues and concerns about how the elections were organized, including the issue of opening polling stations in Transnistria. Parties on the right and centre-right, which traditionally garner a high level of support among the diaspora in Western European countries, alleged that state institutions were trying to limit voting opportunities among the diaspora in those countries by opening an insufficient number of out-of-country polling stations.

Similar to the 2020 presidential election, the issue of a union with Romania was frequently addressed during the analysed period. The unionist parties promoted the idea that the integration of Moldova into the European Union would be possible only through a union with Romania, and that such a union was the only way to improve citizens' living standards.

The messages that parties and politicians posted on Odnoklassniki were mostly pro-Russian. Rhetoric about 'thieves' and 'oligarchs' who undermined the country's development was present in many posts published on Odnoklassniki.

The narrative that the Russian Federation always helps Moldova was systematically emphasized by the leader of the Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova, Dodon. He voiced concern in his messages about the fate of the country, indicating that its sovereignty was in danger.

Misleading or deceptive content used during the electoral campaign

The monitoring paid special attention to efforts to mislead the public and focused on both the public pages of contestants as well as public groups. More detailed data will be provided in the final report.

In the first three weeks of the campaign, the monitors followed and analysed the content on 76 public Facebook groups, 46 Odnoklassniki groups and 30 Telegram channels.

As expected, the volume of information published on these platforms was enormous, with as many as

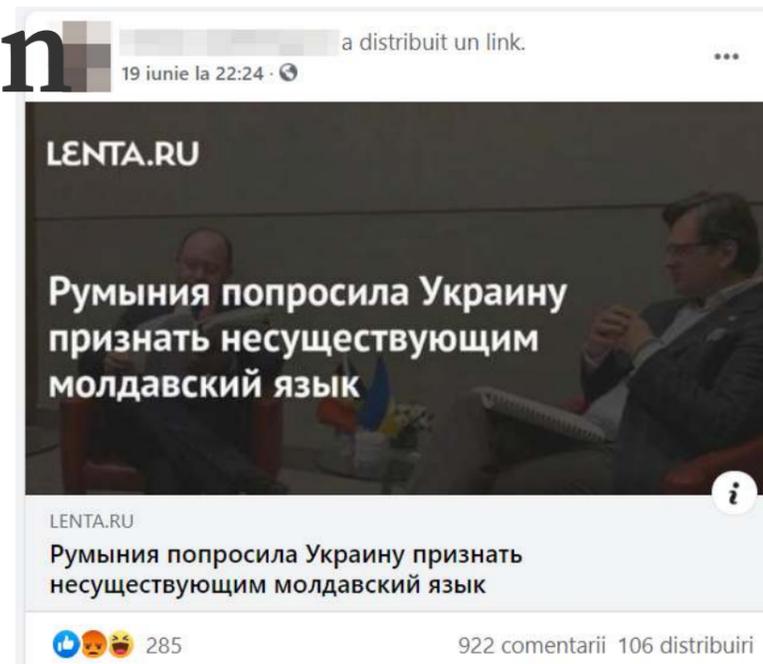
53,632 posts
on Facebook for example.

In the analysis of these public groups, the main emphasis was on assessing the extent to which there was a presence of polarizing or divisive narratives and whether trolls or inauthentic means were used to support political views.

Misleading or deceptive content used during the electoral campaign on Facebook groups

The monitoring showed that Facebook groups reflected a division in society between pro-Western and anti-Western groups. During the monitoring period, the posts in these groups generated 297,551 comments. Although some communities tried to counteract trolls, the large number of comments made this process difficult. In the electoral campaign, the issue of trolls was also analysed by state structures. The Information and Security Service of the Republic of Moldova managed to uncover a so-called troll factory that intended to promote the image of Veaceslav Platon, a businessman who represented an independent candidate in the election.³

³ *Europa Liberă*, 'SIS a deconspirat o „fermă de trolli” care ar promova imaginea lui Veaceslav Platon (Deschide.md)' [SIS unveils a "troll farm" that would promote the image of Veaceslav Platon], <<https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/sis-deconspira-troli-platon/31350901.html>> , accessed 15 July 2021



The three posts that received the most comments and that generated heated debates were on geopolitical topics, namely:

1. a post about how the American people were investing in Moldova's development, while the Russian people were not;
2. an article about Igor Dodon's travels to Moscow;
3. an article mentioning that Romania had asked Ukraine to not recognize Moldovan as a language.



Misleading or deceptive content used during the electoral campaign on Odnoklassniki groups

Most of the groups monitored on Odnoklassniki contained posts with pro-Russian rhetoric. The groups were identified by searching for a set of relevant keywords and also by following the links to similar groups suggested by Odnoklassniki. Following attempts to identify as many communities as possible with either neutral or pro-European content, the monitoring concluded that there were very few of these. In most of the identified groups, the Blocul electoral al Comuniștilor și Socialiștilor was clearly favoured. The monitoring also identified several groups belonging to TV channels affiliated with this bloc, where these media outlets largely distributed their news.

Looking at broader narratives promoted by these groups, anti-Western messages and very clear pro-Russian messages stand out as the dominant patterns. The pro-Russian groups posted several messages with anti-West narratives (on how bad it is in the West and that the only alternative for Moldova was closer ties with the Russian Federation).

⁴In 2014, \$1 billion disappeared from three Moldovan banks: Banca de Economii, Unibank and Banca Socială. The bank fraud in Moldova was a coordinated effort involving all three banks working together to extract as much loan finance as possible from the banks without any obvious business rationale.

One of the groups on Odnoklassniki that attracted most of our attention due to its aggressive and largely false content was the group 'Jos Maia Sandu'. Although Sandu, as President of the Republic of Moldova, did not participate in the election campaign, almost all the messages in this group were dedicated to her. The group largely used messages without a credible source of information. Visual materials that suggested that President Sandu supported sexual minorities were posted, including fake images that showed her participating in marches, and others suggesting that she was against the traditional family, as she has no children. This group had a very clear content strategy, systematically promoting at least 30 derogatory narratives. Here are some of them:

- The Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate steals European money.
- The dead vote for Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate (in the idea that this party are preparing to manipulate the election results) and that Maia Sandu participated directly in the '1 billion fraud' ⁴ at all stages.
- All candidates are thieves.
- Maia Sandu requested that flights from the Russian Federation be stopped, under the pretext of COVID-19, to prevent the Russian diaspora from returning home and voting.
- Maia Sandu will legalize same-sex marriages and will include LGBT propaganda lessons in school curricula.
- Maia Sandu is responsible for rising prices (although the president has no power to increase or decrease prices).
- Moldovan homosexuals support Maia Sandu.
- Moldova's public debt increased because of Maia Sandu.
- Maia Sandu is controlled by the West.
- Ukraine was abandoned by Europeans.
- Belarus as an example of a country that has withstood Western.

Misleading or deceptive content used during the electoral campaign on Odnoklassniki groups

Moldova Early Parliamentary Elections July 2021
Monitoring of Social Media - Preliminary Findings

Although this group does not have a large number of members (1,762), the posts published there have been systematically shared with other related groups. More examples of misinformation used especially on Odnoklassniki will be presented in the final monitoring report.

Certain posts about Ukraine were used to denigrate the role of the European Union in the region. These posts were circulated both in Moldovan Odnoklassniki groups and on YouTube. Their goal was probably to induce the idea that Ukraine had been abandoned by both the European Union and the United States. On the other hand, the authors also distributed videos about Belarus in these groups to demonstrate that the country was doing great without these international partners.

	În opoziție	La guvernare
Petrol	98 16.25	98 21.20
EVOX	95 15.55	95 20.40
Diesel	13.25	16.80
LICHIEPIAT GAZ	09.70	11.35

141 evaluări super

Înainte de alegeri:
O sa dam salarii de 13000 lei si pensii de 2000 lei

Dupa alegeri:
Nu sunt bani la buget si trebuie sa scumpim gazul si lumina

83 evaluări super

ПРЕЗИДЕНТ, КОТОРОГО НЕ ПРИГЛАШАЮТ УЖЕ ДАЖЕ В АФРИКУ!

В Киеве настоящая истерика! Западные лидеры жестко ОТШЛИ Зеленского

80vizualizări

Maia Sandu PREȘEDINTE

26 evaluări super

Хуже, чем в кошмарном сне! Киев ...

Хуже, чем в кошмарном сне! Киев ЗАХЛЕБНУЛСЯ в собственной желчи

109vizualizări

Misleading or deceptive content used during the electoral campaign on Telegram

If parties and their leaders were not very present on Telegram, as was previously mentioned, then anonymous channels as well as channels belonging to some candidates included on the electoral lists were very active, sometimes posting several times a day. The specificity of this platform—namely the fact that Telegram is a platform for those who want to avoid the level of oversight on other platforms—enabled the wide dissemination of messages containing disinformation as well as satirical content designed to diminish the credibility of electoral candidates. Although the Telegram communities in Moldova are not as popular as in other post-Soviet countries, the fact that derogatory information about electoral candidates circulates freely on this platform could have an impact on the integrity of citizens' choice.

Overall, the messages that circulated on the Telegram channels had an anti-Western approach. In these messages, Moldova's international partners, especially the European Union and the United States, were accused of being directly involved in the country's internal affairs and politics.

The visit of the US Ambassador to the headquarters of the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) received great interest from those who post on these Telegram channels. Although the CEC posted a press release on its website about the visit and later posted pictures from the meeting, Telegram channels suggested that this was a private meeting aimed at influencing the elections by requesting that more polling stations be opened abroad. The press release mentioned that officials had discussed several issues related to the organization of early parliamentary elections on 11 July 2021, existing challenges, the organization of elections abroad and the right of voters to vote in localities on the left bank of the Dniester. These topics were addressed in light of events that had taken place in Moldova, with the number of polling stations abroad being contested several times in the courts. At the same time, the Telegram channel 'Antimaidan 2.0 (Moldovan version)'⁵ attached a photo from the meeting and posted that the CEC would not write about pressure and interference in Moldova's internal affairs in a press release and that the ambassador demanded not only an increase in the number of polling stations in the EU and the United States but also a decrease in the number of polling stations for Moldovan citizens in Transnistria and Russia. This post was by far the most popular of those monitored for the purposes of this report, with 13,600 views. For comparison, other posts had, on average, about 1,000 views. At the same time, these channels shared the opinions of some political analysts who classified the visit as interference in the electoral process.

⁵Антимайдан 2.0 (молдавская версия)

Misleading or deceptive content used during the electoral campaign on Telegram

Another type of rhetoric present on Telegram channels targeted the activities of previous governments formed of pro-European parties. Accusations claimed that they were the most corrupt governments in the history of Moldova, and that foreign partners had been accomplices to those parties. At the same time, President Sandu was presented as part of those governments, and claims were made that she had also participated in corruption schemes, including the so-called '1 billion fraud'.⁶

Although Sandu did not run in the elections in July 2021, she was the target of several posts intended to denigrate her image. The target of the posts attacking the President was in fact the Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate, as she had previously been the head of the party. Messages published on Telegram channels accused Sandu of being responsible for the rise in fuel prices and of representing the interests of oil companies in the country. At the same time, these posts suggested that food and fuel prices had increased since December 2020, the period in which Sandu was inaugurated as President.



Антимайдан 2.0 (молдавская версия)



Посол США Дерек Хоган действительно вызвал на ковёр членов ЦИК Молдовы

"Официальные лица обменялись информацией и мнениями в контексте судебных решений об открытии избирательных участков за рубежом". Про давление и вмешательство во внутренние дела Молдовы ЦИК не будет писать в пресс-релизе. Посол требует не только увеличения количества участков в ЕС и США, но и уменьшения числа участков для граждан РМ в Приднестровье и России.

t.me/antimaidanmd/1888

13.6K edited Jun 23 at 12:58

Accusations were also made to the effect that Sandu was being controlled by forces from Western countries, that these forces dictated Moldova's development agenda and that her decisions were made in Berlin and Washington. According to these posts, her anti-corruption agenda was actually a strategy to eliminate inconvenient people.

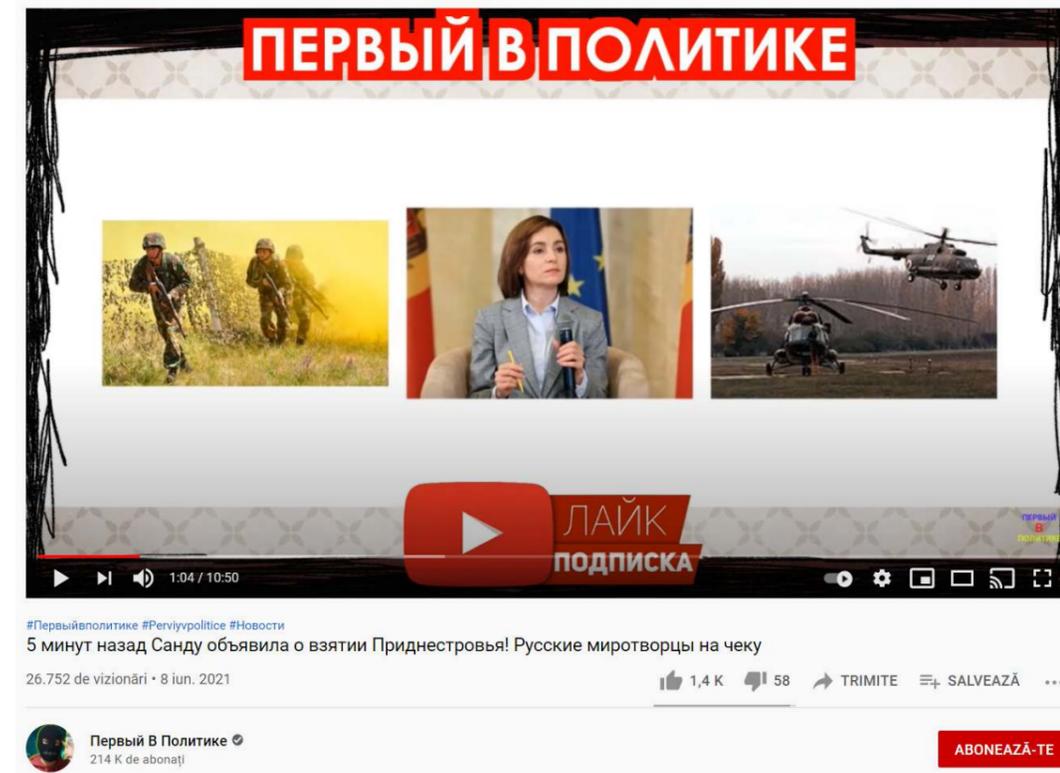
⁶In 2014, \$1 billion disappeared from three Moldovan banks: Banca de Economii, Unibank and Banca Socială. The bank fraud in Moldova was a coordinated effort involving all three banks working together to extract as much loan finance as possible from the banks without any obvious business rationale.

Misleading or deceptive content used during the electoral campaign on YouTube

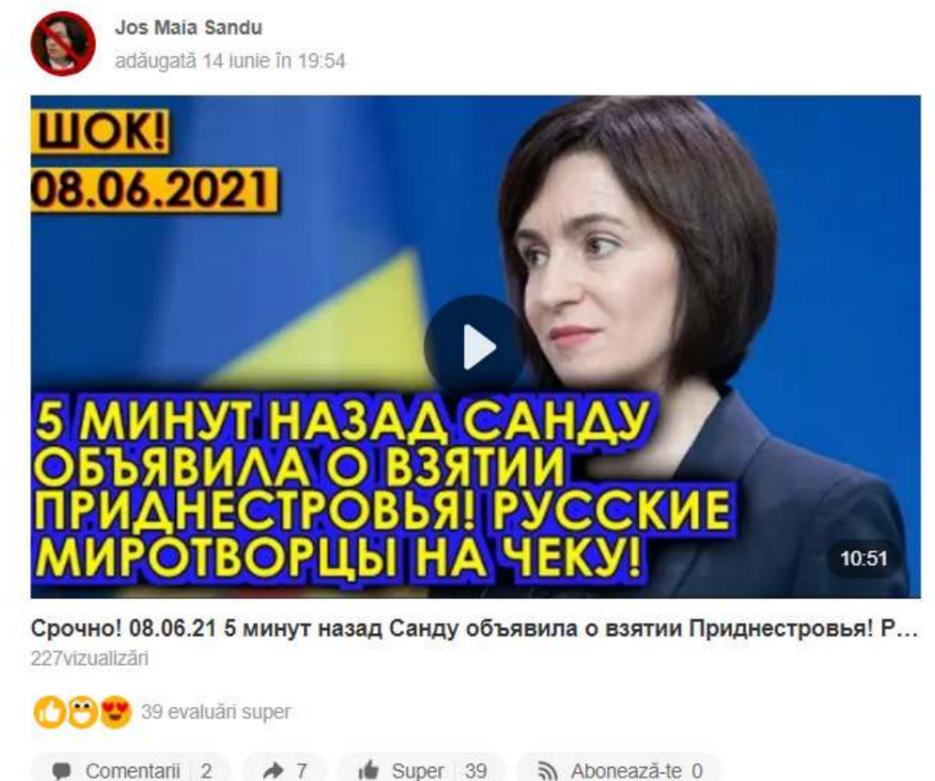
Anonymous YouTube channels were often used to upload videos about former Soviet countries, including Moldova. This content was identified as a result of the manual monitoring of groups on Odnoklassniki during the electoral campaign.⁷ One of the videos that caught our attention had a shocking title and made a false claim: ‘Urgent! Five minutes ago Maia Sandu announced the occupation of Transnistria! Russian peacekeepers are on stage!’

The description of the video states that, ‘At the end of the week, Maia Sandu met with the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, George Kent, who arrived in the region to discuss the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict. After the win of “pro-European” Sandu in the presidential elections in Chisinau, Transnistria remains the only bastion of Russian influence here. According to Sandu and her Western patrons, Transnistria must be destroyed.’ In reality, no such statements were made.

⁷ While Facebook, Instagram, YouTube or Twitter provide some level of access to public data on their platforms (through API), Odnoklassniki and Telegram are closed for any automated access to data via their APIs. As such, while researching these networks, researchers have to physically review all posts and gather the statistical information manually.

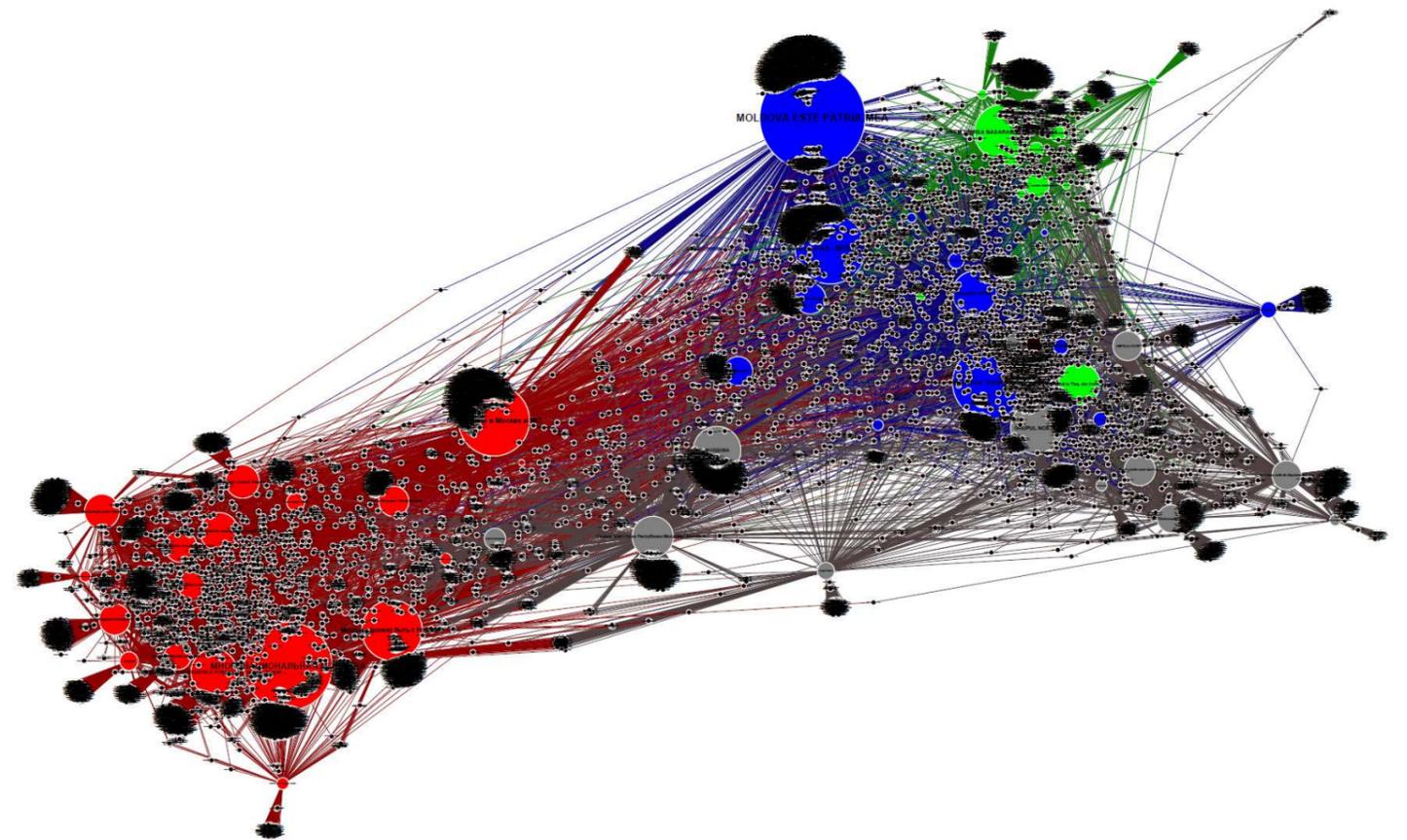


A more detailed analysis of the inauthentic content on social networks will be presented in the final monitoring report.



Network mapping (Facebook)

The monitoring used the open-source network mapping tool Gephi to identify the occurrence and spread of keywords—in our case, words related to the elections and the political parties—in 76 public groups (identified by Mediapoint based on their relevance to the elections) that CrowdTangle tracked in the period from 12 June through 9 July 2021. Based on the qualitative monitoring inside public groups (based on the titles of the groups, the political contestants they promoted and the general content they shared), we divided the groups into pro-Russian (red), pro-Western (blue), pro-unity with Romania (green) or general news content (grey). The content in black is all other content that was not linked with the four main topics. The chart below shows the basic division of these four main topics (pro-Russian, pro-Western, pro-unity with Romania and general information as well as unrelated content) and their overall activity (the size of the nodes is determined based on the number of posts and interactions, whereas the edges are the lines that connect the nodes). In addition, the network chart shows us which groups (nodes) shared content most frequently with each other. The final report will provide more information on the network analysis (see also the ‘Methodology’ section of this report).



Methodology

The methodology applied consisted of quantitative and qualitative analysis of the selected social media content.

The monitoring focused on the country's most popular social media (Facebook, Instagram, Odnoklassniki, Telegram and YouTube) for their overall impact on the election campaign and the information environment as well as electoral integrity.

The level of activity of political actors (all registered parties and key politicians) was analysed quantitatively: using CrowdTangle for Facebook and Instagram and NewsWhip for YouTube. The profiles of political actors on other platforms were monitored manually. The team also analysed political actors' and other parties' engagement in online advertising on Facebook-owned platforms. This type of analysis was not possible on other platforms such as Google (Google Ads) and Odnoklassniki (My Target) because spending data is not publicly disclosed.

The team of four social media monitors analysed the presence of selected narratives in messages posted by political actors on all platforms (a list of narratives is presented in the section List of monitored narratives), and analysts also conducted qualitative monitoring of popular pages (including public Facebook groups) that produced election-related and political content for the presence of misleading or deceptive content. In the initial phase of the monitoring, the team identified the pages and sources with suspicious content and focused on these sources during the campaign, while randomly checking a wider range of pages on monitored social platforms. Social media monitors recorded the cases of such misleading or deceptive content. The collected material will be further analysed to be presented in detail in the final report.

Information operations were also analysed; we applied network mapping to identify any unusual activities, with the main focus on public Facebook groups. The more than 70 public Facebook groups selected were those engaging in discussions about political developments and that were also related to various political actors or the Moldovan geopolitical context (for more details, see 'Network mapping' below).

Network Mapping

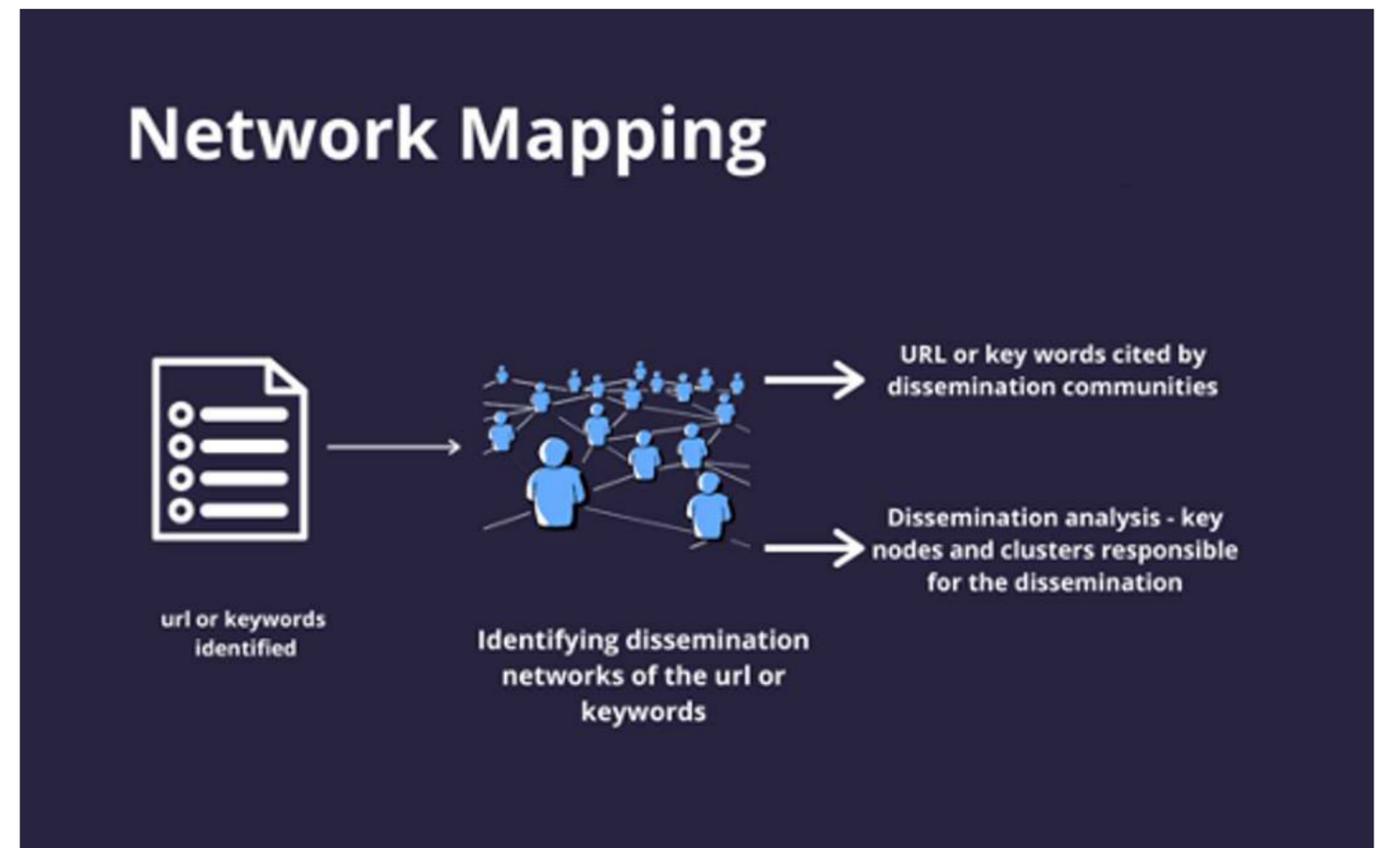
We used the open-source network mapping tool Gephi to track the spread of keywords within groups or pages on CrowdTangle. This enabled us to see the groups in which our keywords received the most interactions and the groups and pages that shared the keywords most frequently. It is also possible to use network graphs to identify the following:

- Which accounts shared certain URLs most frequently
- Which URLs were shared most often between those accounts
- Which accounts shared content most frequently with each other

Definitions:

- *Nodes* are the circles and dots in a network map. In our case, nodes are both accounts and links.
- *Edges* are the lines that connect the nodes. In our case, the edges are the connection between the entity and the URL that it shared.

It is not possible to determine whether the interactions were organic or created by bots or which users posted links to groups.



List of monitoring parameters

Monitored actors

List of Parties

-  Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova
-  Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate
-  Partidul Democrat din Moldova
-  Partidul Șor
-  Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr
-  Partidul Unității Naționale
-  Partidul Nostru
-  Partidul Democrația Acasă
-  Partidul Comuniștilor din Republica Moldova
-  Partidul Oamenilor Muncii
-  Partidul Regiunilor
-  Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor
-  Partidul Schimbării
-  Partidul Dezvoltării și Consolidării Moldovei
-  Partidul Puterea Oamenilor
-  Partidul Acasă Construim Europa

-  Partidul NOI
-  Blocul electoral al Comuniștilor și Socialiștilor
-  Partidul Acțiunii Comune - Congresul Civic
-  Mișcarea Profesioniștilor „Speranța-Надежда”
-  Partidul Verde Ecologist
-  Partidul Legii și Dreptății
-  Veaceslav Valico
-  Partidul "Noua Opțiune Istorică"
-  Partidul Patrioții Moldovei

List of Politicians

- | | | | |
|---|--------------------|---|---------------------|
|  | Igor Dodon |  | Vlad Bilețchi |
|  | Andrei Năstase |  | Igor Grosu |
|  | Octavian Țicu |  | Vitalie Marinuța |
|  | Pavel Filip |  | Vasile Costiuc |
|  | Renato Usatîi |  | Mark Tcaciuc |
|  | Ruslan Codreanu |  | Alexandr Kalinin |
|  | Ilan Șor |  | Mariana Durleșteanu |
|  | Ion Chicu |  | Serghei Toma |
|  | Gheorghe Cavcaliuc | | |

List of monitored narratives

Moldova Early Parliamentary Elections July 2021
Monitoring of Social Media - Preliminary Findings

Pro-West

Wellbeing and democracy are coming from the EU
EU is the best option for Moldova
EU represent a system based on the rule of law
Thanks to the support from EU, Moldova is back on track
EU is Moldova's biggest development partner

Anti-West

Maia Sandu is controlled by the West
Maia Sandu represents the interests of globalists and Soros
The West is directly involved in the internal affairs of the Republic of Moldova
EU is weak and has its own problems
The diaspora has no right to decide the future of the Republic of Moldova as they don't live in the country
The diaspora is paid to go to vote.
NATO aims to thaw the Transnistrian conflict and start a war on the Dniester.
The West demands from Moldova an anti-Russian orientation.
The EU forces Member States to enact policies against their will and against the best interests of the people
The EU promotes sexual minorities, discrediting traditional values and faith.
Civil society (NGOs) in Moldova is a "fifth column" of the West
The EU is trying to expand its geopolitical footprint in the East to weaken Russia
The EU is incapable of being effective on the international stage
Anti-Russian movement in Moldova is prepaid by the West

Pro-Russia

Russia is constantly helping the Republic of Moldova
The strategic partnership with Russia is a significant factor in the development of exports
It was better in the Soviet Union
The wellbeing of Moldova is possible only in an alliance with Russia
The Western values are decadent and only Russia represents the traditional values

Anti-Russia

Igor Dodon is controlled by Russia
The campaign of the Communist and Socialist block is funded by Russia
Russia conducts hostile actions against its neighbours and its own population
Russia interferes in the Moldovan elections
Russia has an occupation army in Moldova

Other domestic narratives

The sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova is in danger
Maia Sandu is to blame for rising prices
State institutions block the electoral process
Right-wing parties want to close schools, hospitals, dissolve districts, sell land to foreigners
Right-wing parties promote "liberal values" (church attack, promotion of sexual minorities)
Everyone wants to live well in Moldova, regardless of the language spoken and nationality.

Pro-Unification with Romania

Romanian National Anti-corruption Division must come to Moldova to win the fight with corruption
Integration into the European Union and joining NATO is possible only through the Union with Romania
The union (with Romania) will quickly bring the standard of living from Moldova closer to the standard of living in Romania
The prosperous future of Moldovan citizens can only take place in a reunited Romania, under the shield of NATO.

Anti-Unification with Romania

Romanians are fascists.
Romanians occupied Bessarabia
Romania asks Ukraine to officially recognize the non-existence of the "Moldovan language"
The state language is the Moldovan language

Right-wing parties are for foreign policy subordination interests of the USA, the EU and Romania
Maia Sandu promotes sexual minorities
Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate is the same Partidul Liberal Democrat din Moldova
Thieves and oligarchs are the cause of the stagnation of the Republic of Moldova
Polls published before the election are manipulative

About the authors

Founded in 2009, Mediapoint's mission is to innovate the democratic process by involving citizens and unlocking the potential of technology. The organization has launched a series of innovative online projects and conducted over 150 workshops and events nationwide, including three social innovation camps. Mediapoint's priorities for 2020–2030 are promoting citizen participation in democratic processes, improving government transparency and increasing access to information, and facilitating interaction between the authorities and citizens by developing digital platforms.

MEMO 98 is an internationally recognized, independent, and non-profit specialist media institution with 22 year-long of experience conducting media monitoring and research and assisting civil society groups. Using tested and approved methodologies and tools, we provide media analysis and media monitoring with tangible results, in particular during election periods. Having participated in more than 120 election observation missions and about 150 media & election-related projects and training in more than 55 countries (in the Commonwealth of the Independent States and the Balkan countries, but also in Africa, Asia, South America, and the Middle East), our experts provide assistance on media & electoral and other democratic arrangements.



Authors

Livia Țurcanu, Mediapoint

Andrei Fornea, Mediapoint

Rasťo Kužel, MEMO 98

Marek Mračka, MEMO 98

Braňo Kohn, MEMO 98

Michal Hollý, Slovak Academy of Sciences

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The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with the mission to advance democracy worldwide, as a universal human aspiration and enabler of sustainable development. We do this by supporting the building, strengthening and safeguarding of democratic political institutions and processes at all levels. Our vision is a world in which democratic processes, actors and institutions are inclusive and accountable and deliver sustainable development to all.



International IDEA

Stromsborg, SE-103 34 Stockholm, Sweden

Email: info@idea.int,

Website: www.idea.int

Mediapoint

31 august 1989, 98, Chişinău, Republic of Moldova

Email: contact@mediapoint.md

Website: www.mediapoint.md

MEMO 98

Štefana Králik 1/A, 841 08 Bratislava, Slovakia

Email: memo98@memo98.sk

Website: www.memo98.sk