



Echo chamber as a transformative digital phenomenon – an outlook on the Moldovan electoral system’s past, present and future

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Introduction

The analysis of the latest four elections, both presidential and parliamentary, held in the Republic of Moldova has revealed that the digital context and social media play an increased critical and determinant role in how electoral campaigns are run or conducted, how candidates and political parties develop and implement their political strategies, how voters interact with electoral stakeholders, how Moldovans consume the news and take decisions and, ultimately, how different phenomena influence both the electoral candidates and the voters. Along with the electoral researchers and practitioners, who state that the electoral future will look more digital and more complex ¹, the Republic of Moldova shall start preparing for the next elections, the local (2023), presidential (2024), and parliamentary (2025) elections, in order to be ready from the civic, behavioural and legal perspective to conduct free, democratic and pluralist elections in a highly digital and social media dominant world.

The present Study aims to capture the main changes, transformations and phenomena, which accelerate a new electoral reality not only in Moldova, but also in the region, and to present conclusions and recommendations for the authorities, population at large and civic stakeholders, equipping them with the necessary knowledge, good practices, methodologies and capacities to conduct the next elections, by harnessing the digital dividends, respecting the democratic and fundamental human rights and by taking into consideration the digital realities, threats and opportunities.

The first Chapter of the Study titled “Demographics and social media as ‘invisible’ catalysts for electoral behaviour and electoral processes” focuses on the voters’ recent demographic and behavioural changes in light of the unprecedented rise in popularity of online and social media platforms.

The second Chapter “Regional outlook: Romanian and Ukrainian perspective in the new digital electoral reality” presents a regional context, describing the recent electoral experiences of Romania and Ukraine through the digital lens.

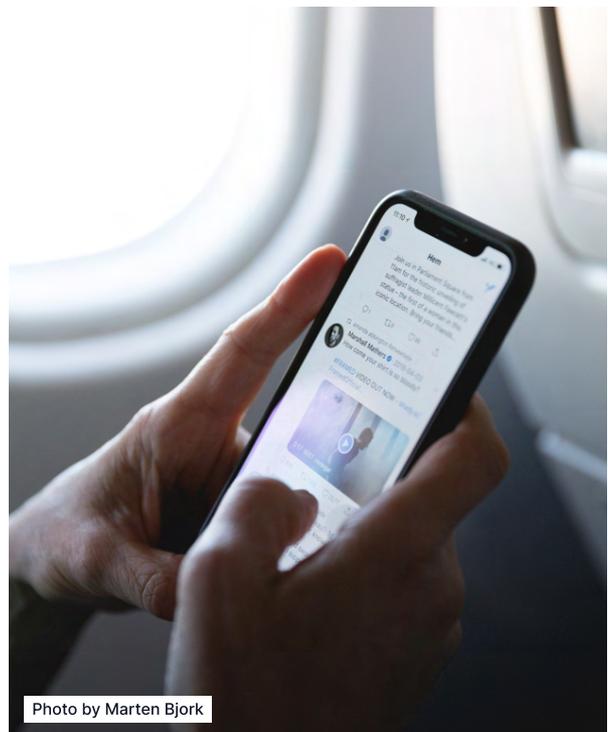


Photo by Marten Bjork

¹ PROTECTING ELECTORAL INTEGRITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE, 2021, The Report of the Kofi Annan Commission on Elections and Democracy in the Digital Age.

The discussions covered by the third Chapter “Is the digital phenomenon driving a new electoral legal framework?” focus on different countries’ experience, showing how they integrate/mainstream the digital electoral context in the legal and civic agendas, the mechanisms they use to this end, and their preliminary results.

The fourth Chapter titled “Echo chamber phenomenon in Moldova: an electoral comparative outlook at presidential and parliamentary elections held during the 2016-2021 timeframe” provides an interesting, comprehensive and evidence-based overview on the echo chamber effect during the last four elections conducted in Moldova. The Chapter contains a comparative analysis on the 2019 parliamentary elections vs. the elections held in 2021, and on the 2016 presidential elections vs. the elections conducted in 2020.

The fifth Chapter titled “Presenting the results of the first qualitative study on the echo chamber effect and digital phenomena in the electoral context of Moldova” deals with the outcomes of the first qualitative study on the echo chamber effect, conducted during August – September 2021. The Study aimed to measure voters’ experience, feelings and perceptions regarding the echo chamber effect and other digital phenomena in Moldova.

The “Conclusions and recommendations” covered by the last Chapter are intended for various stakeholders, serving as a way forward for the next electoral polls.



Photo by ROBIN WORRALL

Demographics and social media as 'invisible' catalysts for electoral behaviour and electoral processes

The new digital electoral reality needs to be discussed and analyzed in a much broader and multifaceted framework. In Moldova's case some important demographic and behavioural changes have started to emerge over the recent years, and these structural changes shall be acknowledged and well understood in the electoral context, so that all stakeholders are prepared for the digital shift in the electoral paradigm.

According to the National Bureau of Statistics, as of January 2021, Moldova has a population of 2.59 million people.²

AGE	BOTH SEXES	MEN	WOMEN
0-14	476307	245342	230965
15-29	440898	223505	217393
30-44	584904	291672	293232
45-59	510988	244908	266080
60-74	468192	196665	271527
75+	115818	37813	78005

With one of the lowest birth rates and massive migration, especially within the working-age population groups (15-29, 30-44 and 45-59), Moldova is the third country in the world in terms of population shrinkage.³ The 2021 IOM Migration Data Survey⁴ concluded that the total number of Moldovan emigrants abroad is 1.16 million, of whom 52% are women. Italy, UK, Germany, Romania, Spain, Canada, USA, Russia, Ireland and France are considered the major migration destinations.

Along with the socio-demographic changes, Moldova is witnessing a massive digital and media behavioural change.

The Internet and social media increased popularity has determined the way and the frequency of use and consumption of news, information, as well as communication amongst people.

² National Bureau of Statistics, <https://statbank.statistica.md/pxweb/pxweb/ro/20%20Populatia%20si%20procesele%20demografice/?xId=b2ff27d7-0b96-43c9-934b-42e1a2a9a774>

³ UNFPA, Shrinking Populations in Eastern Europe. 2018, <https://eeca.unfpa.org/en/publications/shrinking-populations-eastern-europe?page=4%2C0%2C0>

⁴ IOM GMDAC Migration Data Survey. Republic of Moldova, 2021 https://moldova.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1266/files/documents/MOLDOVA%20GMDAC%20Report%202021.04.22_rev-IOM_cleaned.pdf

With a fairly good penetration of the Internet – 88 % as of 2019, and the increased base of Internet users – 2.38 million⁵, Moldova is moving across most age segments from the traditional information sources – like newspapers, magazines, radio, to the Internet and social media.

According to the 2021 Public Opinion Barometer, the Internet (23%) is the second source of information, after TV. At the same time, the most trusted sources of information are the Internet and social media (25.1%), advancing TV (18%). Almost 65% of Moldovans access Facebook and/or Odnoklassniki on a daily basis, which are considered the most popular social media platforms ⁶.

Although back in 2018, both platforms registered approximately the same number of users: 910 000 Facebook active members and 885 860 members on Odnoklassniki, by 2020, Odnoklassniki platform daily use dropped by 28%, while Facebook increased by 15%. An interesting fact is that TikTok has started to gain more popularity, especially amongst the youth population ⁷.

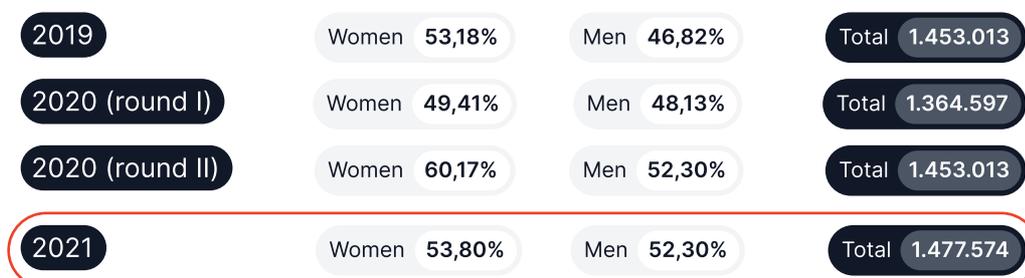
According to the national study commissioned by Internews, “Perceptions of the Population of the Republic of Moldova on Mass Media”, 34% of respondents have mentioned that social media is their daily most preferred source of information ⁸.

Moreover, 24% of respondents perceive the information about socio-political topics published and promoted on social networks as false, while 61% think that Moldovans find difficult to extremely difficult when it comes to differentiating fake from real news. All these circumstances coupled with educational and behavioural context, lead to a society which is extremely exposed to different digital phenomena, including fake news, hate speech, echo chamber effect, trolling, etc. ⁹

The detailed analysis of voters' profile, via demographic and digital lenses, has revealed interesting and unprecedented results in the last parliamentary and presidential polls.

The CEC data and comparative analysis of 2019 vs. 2021 parliamentary polls revealed two interesting facts, namely that voter turnout increased, and men participation in elections grew by 8% in 2021. Within the polls, the mobilization of women has been strong in both elections. ¹⁰

Gender profile of citizens, who participated in elections



⁵ ANRECTI https://anrecti.md/news_060420

⁶ Public Opinion Barometer, 2021, IPP, <http://bop.ipp.md/en>

⁷ Agora 2020, <https://agora.md/stiri/80665/studiu-facebook-instagram-sau-tiktok-care-sunt-cele-mai-populare-retele-de-socializare-printre-moldoveni>

⁸ Internews 2021, https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/2019-02/03_INTERNEWS_Final%20report_25.10.18_EN-web.pdf

⁹ Budu, V., 2020. Alegeri pentru moldoveni. Arhitectura dezinformării în mediul online, Available at: <http://mediacritica.md/ro/alegeri-pentru-moldoveni-arhitectura-dezinformarii-mediul-online/>

¹⁰ UNDP, 2021, https://www.md.undp.org/content/moldova/en/home/library/effective_governance/alegeri-parlamentare-anticipate-2021--analiza-de-gen.html

The disaggregated data on 2021 elections enabled us to perform a cross-sector analysis, putting electoral data, social media use and information consumption trends in one analytical perspective.^{11 12}

GROUP AGE	TOTAL PARTICIPATION	PARTICIPATION RATE	% PER GROUP OF TOTAL PERSONS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE VOTING	FACEBOOK USERS	PERCENTAGE, AGE DISTRIBUTION OF FACEBOOK USERS
18 - 25 years old	118.729	41,43%	8,04%	270,000	21%
26 - 40 years old	405.296	44,34%	27,43%	570.000	47%
41 - 55 years old	370.193	50,59%	25,05%	311.000	24%
56 - 70 years old	442.234	70,38%	29,93%	76.000	6%
71+ years old	141.122	63,50%	9,55%	51.000	4%
Total	1.477.574	53,1%		1.278.00	

Some important facts

Based on the above data, some important facts and observations can be highlighted and drawn: three age groups, namely 26-40, 42-55 and 56-70 year olds are the most predominant groups both as Facebook users (accounting for almost 77% of the total user base), and as a share of total participants in the elections (82.1%), with an average participation rate of 55.1%.

The 2021 POB age group desegregated data also revealed that the same three age groups were the most frequent users of Facebook. Moreover, they consider social platforms and the Internet as trustworthy and reliable information sources. The recent UNDP study revealed that the same social media platform was the third most used source of information during the electoral campaign, after TV shows and spots ¹³.



Photo by Markus Winkler

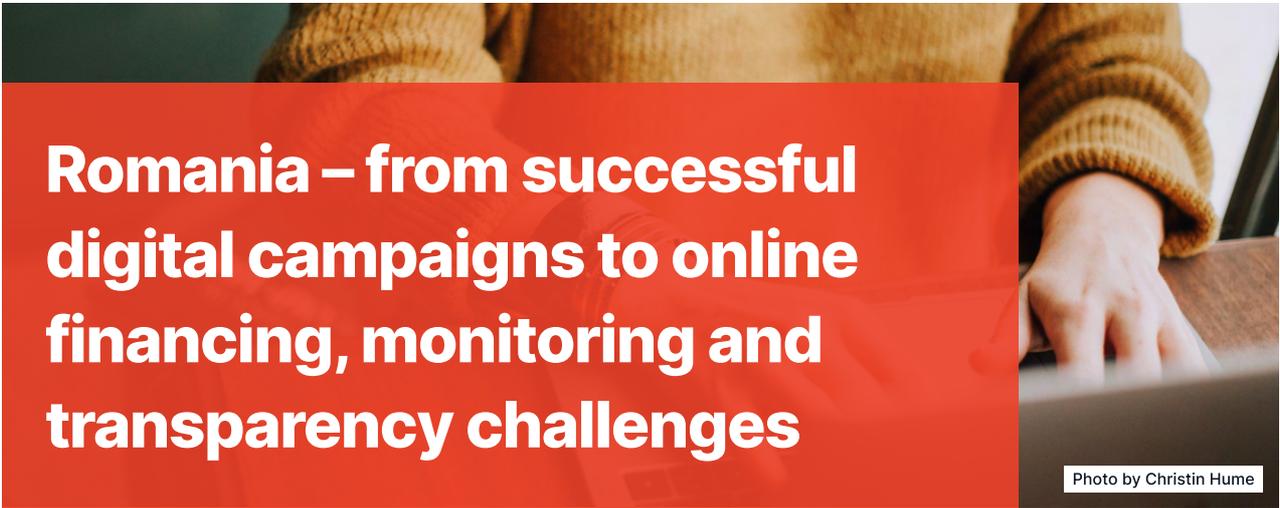
¹¹ UNDP, 2021, https://www.md.undp.org/content/moldova/en/home/library/effective_governance/alegeri-parlamentare-anticipate-2021--analiza-de-gen.html

¹² Facebook users in Moldova, <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-moldova/2020/03/>

¹³ UNDP, 2021, Presidential Elections. Post-electoral opinion survey – 2020, https://www.md.undp.org/content/moldova/en/home/library/effective_governance/alegerile-prezideniale-2020--sondaj-deopinie-post-electoral.html

Regional outlook: Romanian and Ukrainian perspective in **the new digital electoral reality**

The regional overview of the new digital electoral context has both a research and practical value. Although placed in the same geographical location, Romania and Ukraine have their own specifics and peculiarities. Romania is a Member State of the European Union and NATO, while Ukraine is an active member of the Eastern European Partnership and tries to consolidate both its democratic and independent status.



Romania – from successful digital campaigns to online financing, monitoring and transparency challenges

Photo by Christin Hume

The Romanian media and online landscape have generally followed the global trends. Even though the leading media trusts have a well-established position and strong brands, linear and online TV remain the most important sources of news in Romania. At the opposite side, printed media accounts for only 19%. According to the same Study, 68% of Romanians resort to Facebook as their main media outlet, while 27% fully trust the news posted on social media platforms.¹⁴

In 2014, Romania was considered a regional landmark example of harnessing the digital dividends in the context of presidential elections. With a smart and targeted social media campaign, the PNL candidate won with a comfortable score. One of the campaign key success factors was the increased visibility and presence of the electoral candidate on Facebook via official pages, dedicated groups, Facebook ads, lives, videos, etc. An interesting fact was the liaising communication momentum between citizens at home and Diaspora, in light of major dissatisfaction with the opponent candidate and the leading party performance. Most of the posts, shares and comments had a strong emotional content and, most importantly, brought values and areas of interest, connection and bonding. A content and comment analysis revealed that the social media campaign was built under the core idea of 'Revolution 2.0 starts on the Internet'.¹⁵

¹⁴ Digital News Report, Romania, 2019, <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2019/romania-2019/>

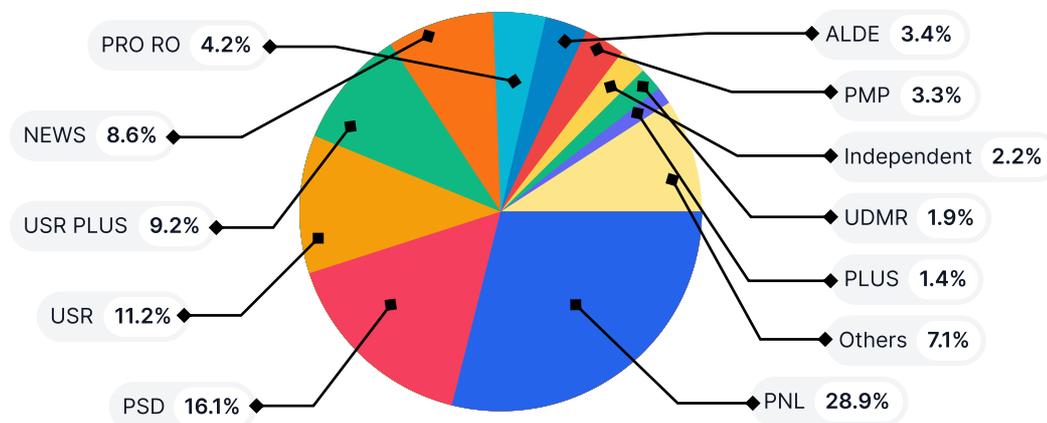
¹⁵ <https://www.andreaperlato.com/graphpost/social-network-analysis-on-romania-elections/>

The next electoral poll, conducted in 2019, brought several distinct and important conclusions, highlighted in the Monitoring reports, prepared by the OSCE in March 2020.¹⁶ The USR and PNL presidential candidates engaged on social media, mainly Facebook, which was considered the most popular social media platform in Romania. The strategy envisaged online electoral ads, posts from public events, etc.

Financing and transparency remain the most critical aspects of the political digital campaign. In this respect, Expert Forum in its Monitoring Report on the 2020 electoral campaign financing¹⁷, highlighted that during the local election campaign, political parties and affiliated persons spent about RON 3 million for their promotion on Facebook. Despite the fact that competitors were required to mark out the political materials during the campaign, including those used online, in many cases, the parties did not comply with the legislation. Online promotion remains under-regulated and difficult to control by external observers and authorities.

Facebook expenditure, August 2020

Facebook: Estimations of expenditure, August 2020



Facebook: Top 10 expenditure of political parties and affiliates

¹⁶ https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/8/a/449200_0.pdf

¹⁷ <https://expertforum.ro/en/monitoring-campaign-finance-local-2020/>

Along with that, the reports concluded that overspending was recorded as compared to the limitations prescribed by the legislation. Due to the fact that local elections overlapped with the start of the signature collection process for the parliamentary elections, the delimitation of material usage was questioned and obscured.¹⁸

Ukraine – digital electoral campaigns conducted in the polarization and personal data security context

Photo by hahadat Rahman

The last electoral polls in Ukraine were marked by both internal and external factors. The latter were massively discussed and studied by both researchers and practitioners, in light of Ukraine geopolitical situation and tense relationship with Russia. The propaganda machinery, fuelled by trolling, fake news and disinformation from Pro-Eastern mass media contributed massively to further polarization and increased ethnic tensions. Along with that, the Central Electoral Commission was the target of several cyberattacks.¹⁹

The presidential candidates and political parties in the last electoral polls had very strong and massively visible communication campaigns on social media platforms, including Facebook, vKontakte and Telegram, using digital vehicles, such as chatbots, mailing lists, mobile apps, etc. According to the experts, the campaign run by the pro-Western presidential candidate gathered 80,000 subscribers on his Telegram channel, recruited 608,527 volunteers online and implemented over 3,200 digital advertising campaigns, using micro targeting.²⁰

During the parliamentary campaign, political parties ran 40,427 targeted political ads, having spent overall USD 1,800,000. *It was also discovered that, despite the recently tightened Facebook's election-related rules, some pages published unmarked ads with elements of negative campaigning or so-called "black PR" against certain candidates.*

Even though the digital campaigns became the main communication drivers, the Ukrainian electoral legislation did not distinguish between offline and online campaigning and failed to establish clear mechanisms for reporting the funding allocated for online ads. Thus, some 2019 parliamentary election participants did not provide explicit spending on digital advertising while civil society representatives and regulators were not able to apply the watchdog and legal mechanisms in order to ensure fair online campaigns.

¹⁸ <https://expertforum.ro/en/monitoring-campaign-finance-local-2020/>

¹⁹ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-on-the-net/2019/the-crisis-of-social-media/digital-election-interference>

²⁰ https://cdn.ttc.io/s/ourdataourselves.tacticaltech.org/The-Use-of-Personal-Voter-Data-During-2019-Elections-in-Ukraine_EN.pdf

One of the major concerns and challenges, highlighted by civil society representatives was related to the collection, storage and use of citizens' personal data. According to the investigation, the main political parties collected personal data on users, which later could have been used for targeted political ads and commercial communication. According to the Study titled "Personal Voter Data Use in the 2019 Ukrainian Parliamentary Elections: A Report on Digital Influence Outside the Scope of Disinformation"²¹, none of the parliamentary parties' websites and social media outlets fully complied with the requirements and user consent principles referred to in the Ukrainian data protection legislation. And while Ukraine's electoral legislation contains no regulations aimed at safeguarding the use of voters' personal information, the country's 2010 personal data protection law sets mandatory requirements for all automated processing of personal data, which also apply to online practices of political parties and candidates.

The data protection topic has become increasingly critical, as personal data leakage from the Ukrainian government registries and commercial databases occurred recently. Along with this, there have been assumptions regarding illegal linkages in data usage between political stakeholders and public authorities, and that citizens' data are not fully protected either during electoral campaigns or afterwards. The problem with data protection goes beyond the electoral boundaries, as it poses great threats and concerns on Ukraine other structural reforms and geopolitical situation with Russia.²²



Case Study

Given the proliferation of commercial digital technologies now used for political means, it is pivotal for Ukraine to introduce important clarifications, mechanisms and safeguards pertaining to online campaigning and protection of citizens' personal data - before the situation is further exploited by either domestic or external actors.²³

²¹ https://cdn.ttc.io/s/ourdataourselves.tacticaltech.org/The-Use-of-Personal-Voter-Data-During-2019-Elections-in-Ukraine_EN.pdf

²² <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/ukraine-digital-political-campaigning-ramps-little-oversight/>

²³ Idem

Is the digital phenomenon driving a new electoral legal framework?

Over the last years, both the EU and international institutions have acknowledged the importance of extending the research and study on the digital reality, its negative and positive impacts on elections, on the one hand, and of addressing its short- and long-term effects via legal, institutional and education mechanisms, on the other hand.

In this respect, in 2018, the Council of Europe presented a comprehensive report on disinformation and electoral campaigns ²⁴, whereas one year earlier a specialized expert group was set up to provide support and advice to different states on how to develop, amend and adopt the necessary legal and digital framework in order to prevent and combat harmful digital phenomena.

In this respect, various countries have started to draft and implement specific approaches, strategies and actions to tackle the negative effects of digital reality and secure the electoral processes. Most of the countries have undertaken a mix of actions, including task force creation, amending laws, bills, conducting civic education and media literacy campaigns, etc. ²⁵

The USA has set up a reference best practice in institutionalizing civic education and media literacy curricula. The public authorities of California have adopted a law, empowering the Department of Education to support the creation and adoption of media literacy curricula and materials. ²⁶

In the same vein, during the EU parliamentary election campaign, the Netherlands conducted an extensive public awareness campaign, with a focus on social media users, targeting the prevention of disinformation.

While some countries prefer softer approaches, Spain, France and Germany have taken bold and concrete legal measures to prevent and combat the negative digital phenomena, especially during the electoral cycle.

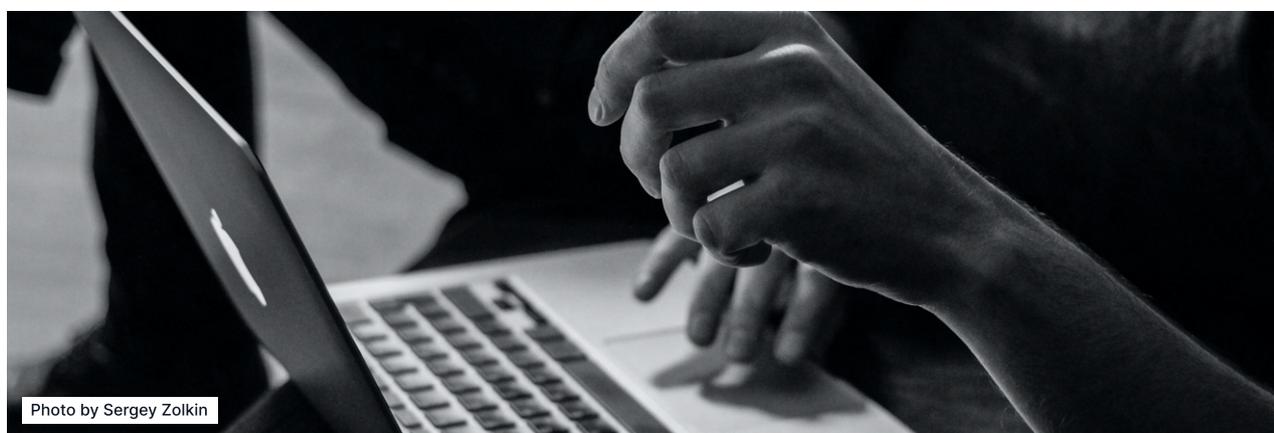


Photo by Sergey Zolkin

²⁴ <https://rm.coe.int/disinformation-and-electoral-campaigns-research/16809f1618>

²⁵ A guide to anti-misinformation actions around the world, <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/anti-misinformation-actions/>

²⁶ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2019/08/23/the-online-privacy-echo-chamber-is-an-anything-really-changing/?sh=b7ddb287928>

Germany is considered a pioneer in drafting and passing the hate speech law for social networks, effective as of 2018. Although subject to many debates and criticism, the German authorities have managed to force the giant social media platforms to delete the illegal content within 24h after the report.

France adopted, in 2018, a specific bill on preventing and combating the spread of fake news and manipulation of information during the electoral campaigns. Moreover, the law enforced transparency principles, requiring social media platforms to disclose who purchased and owned the sponsored political ads.



Photo by Jeremy Bezanger

Spain has created a task force group to monitor the electoral campaigns on social media. It also joined and strengthened the *EU efforts aimed at enabling the European Rapid Alert System*.²⁷

The system has been developed for the European Parliament elections. The platform connects the national contact points that work on addressing disinformation campaigns.

It also connects the European Cooperation Network on Elections (ECNE) and the Internal Network Against Disinformation of the Commission.

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The system has developed beyond the initial concept of a system that mainly shares 'alerts' in cases of substantial disinformation campaigns to a community of experts that

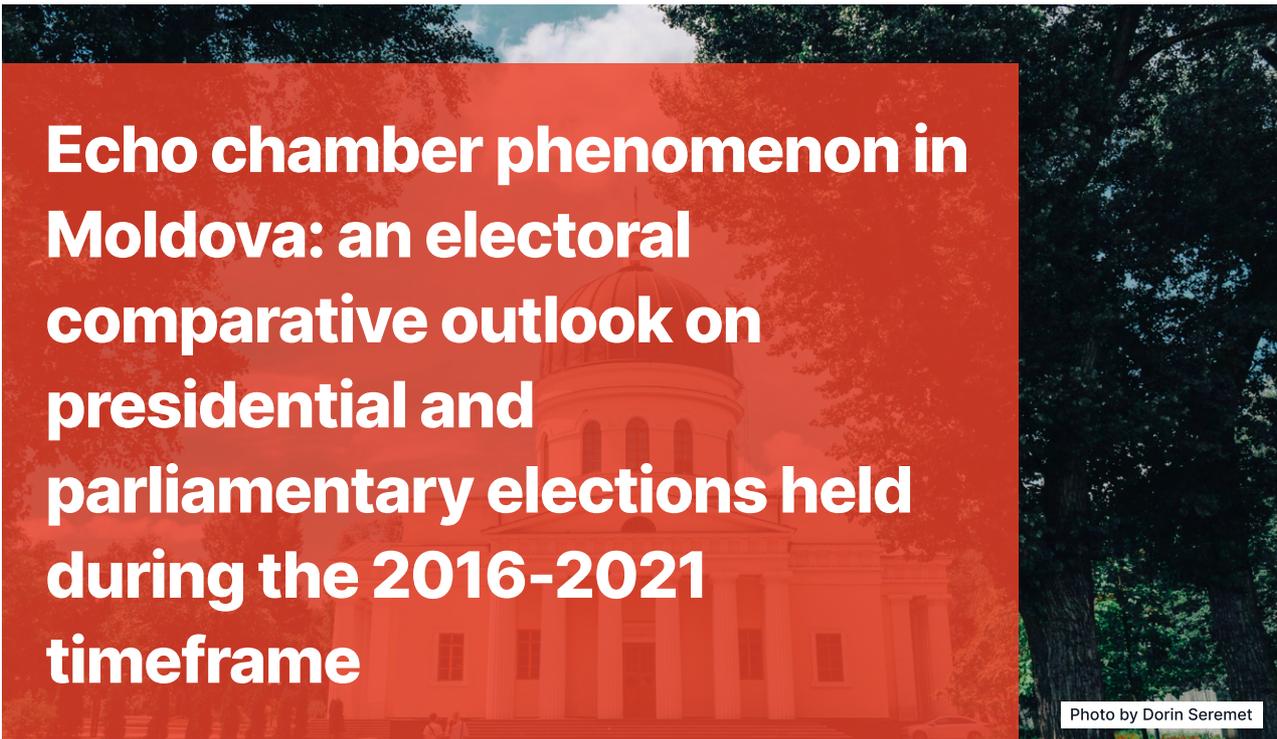
share information and insights to increase common situational awareness and design common approach and response to disinformation.

While more developed and democratic countries strive to develop, adopt and implement proper mechanisms, taking into consideration democratic and human rights principles, there are governments around the world, which use restrictive and subjective approaches, from arrests, to Internet shutdowns, social media taxation and criminal penalties.

Uganda has enforced the so-called social media tax aimed at controlling the comments and contents posted by users on social media. At the same time, the Government wanted to create an additional revenue channel. It shall be noted that the Ugandan authorities shut down the social media platform during the 2016 elections, whereas the country ranks very low on mass media freedom.²⁸

²⁷ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/P-8-2019-001705_EN.html

²⁸ A guide to anti-misinformation actions around the world, <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/anti-misinformation-actions/>



Echo chamber phenomenon in Moldova: an electoral comparative outlook on presidential and parliamentary elections held during the 2016-2021 timeframe

Photo by Dorin Seremet

Although the echo chamber effect as a socio-digital phenomenon has become the research focus quite recently, the criticality of this topic in the electoral context is more and more evident, representing a special research interest for both the academic community and practitioners.

The Internet, social media and algorithms role and influence on elections have been acknowledged and started to be analyzed, addressed and evaluated throughout the world.

Mature democracies, such as the USA, the UK and Germany, have learnt several important lessons regarding the magnitude and effects of digital phenomena, echo chamber inclusive, on Brexit referendum, presidential and parliamentary elections.^{29 30}

Moldova, based on the last four parliamentary and presidential polls held from 2016 through 2021, also had the opportunity to understand and study the specifics and peculiarities of the electoral processes in the new digital world and to be better equipped and prepared for the next electoral cycles.

Traditionally, the electoral context in Moldova has been marked by the geo-political discourse, which has also influenced social media contents and division between the two geo-political orientations: Pro-Western and Pro-Eastern.

The socio-demographic changes, presented in Chapter I, have clearly revealed that the electoral tactics, behaviour, informational habits have radically changed, and that the digital component started to be more and more present on both sides of the electoral processes: voters and parties/candidates.

²⁹ Bridging divides in a post-truth world, OECD 2017, <https://www.oecd.org/digital/bridging-divides-in-a-post-truth-world.htm>

³⁰ Beyond Elections' Digital Propaganda: Need for Improvement of Public Debates, 2019, American Institute for Contemporary Studies, <https://www.aicgs.org/2019/02/beyond-elections-digital-propaganda-need-for-improvement-of-public-debates/>

Over the analyzed period, the number of social media users in Moldova has steadily increased, along with the changes in the preferred platforms.

The 2016 presidential elections displayed one peculiarity, i.e. the online battle between two different social media platforms, popular at that moment, Odnoklassniki and Facebook. Active and strong communities were created on Facebook to support the Pro-Western candidate; at the same time, the other candidate supporters used the already created communities to promote Pro-Eastern political messages on Odnoklassniki.

“

Odnoklassniki has been consistently used to create an online anti-European propaganda echo system in the Republic of Moldova. Thus, the following main themes have been explored: the nostalgia for the Soviet past, the glorification of the Russian past, the ethnic Moldovenism and Romania phobia, accusing and discrediting the Western countries and institutions. Those messages were transposed by the Pro-Eastern candidate who had a much higher degree of visibility on Odnoklassniki than the Pro-Western one.³¹ The analysis of its electoral campaign content revealed that those topics were massively used against the Pro-Western candidate.

On the other hand, Facebook has been traditionally perceived in Moldova as a Pro-Western platform. In a similar fashion as the campaign of the Romanian president, the Pro-Western candidate main purpose was to focus on securing the votes of pro-European groups, which supported the European Integration vector.

The echo chamber phenomenon was quite intense and strongly visible in Moldova, as the candidates' supporters used and spread opinions and messages on those social media networks.

There was even an initiative called “Adopt an Odnoklassnik” aimed to interact directly with several social strata on social media networks, overshadowing a huge wave of “migrations” of Internet users from Facebook to Odnoklassniki, in order to dilute the information circulating on this platform with different opinions and sources.³²

Both parliamentary polls held in 2019 and 2021, as well the 2020 presidential campaign, have shown that Facebook was the most used social media platform by the candidates. Those findings were also highlighted in the UNDP study - 2020 Presidential Elections, Post-electoral opinion survey, which concluded that social media was the third most used source of information during the electoral campaign, after TV shows and spots.

³² How social media fuels echo chambering phenomenon in Moldova and how to address it?, 2021, <https://medium.com/undp-moldova/echo-chambers-what-are-these-and-how-they-affect-elections-in-moldova-eb19f26d9f5f>

³¹ Institute for Public Policy, 2019, ODNOKLASSNIKI ȘI ALEGERI PARLAMENTARE ÎN REPUBLICA MOLDOVA

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In addition, the pandemic restrictions have “forced” the candidates to reconsider the classical and traditional electoral tactics, and try focusing on digital and social media methods.

An important fact is that both parties and presidential candidates have started to “invest” more in digital means and campaigns, rather than in offline campaign attributes, including traditional OHS, printed media, etc.

According to the “Presidential elections – monitoring report on social media”, 2021³³, the comparative analysis between 2016 and 2020 presidential elections concludes that the final candidates’ posts on social media platform had a grown impact. Thus, Igor Dodon’s interactions increased almost tenfold, from 21,200 in 2016 to 199,128 in 2020. On the other hand, Maia Sandu’s posts increased from 350,900 in 2016 to 441,068 in 2020.

All politicians and parties registered in the campaign spent EUR 40,616 for advertising on Facebook and Instagram between August 4 and October 29, 2020, of which approximately EUR 21,000 were spent by the final candidates.

Unfortunately, the financing of online campaign and social media ads remains a grey area in terms of both reporting and monitoring.³⁴



Photo by Marten Bjork

As highlighted in the Promo Lex Election Monitoring Report³⁵, not all competitors have submitted financial reports to the CEC, whereas the submitted financial reports were incomplete. At the same time, Promo-LEX estimated the unreported expenses for all six weeks of the election campaign at the level of at least MDL 10,859,900 (about half a million Euros - ed.).

It is no wonder that only 15% of voters believe that financing of political parties/electoral candidates and electoral campaigns is fully transparent.³⁶

³³ <https://memo98.sk/article/moldovan-presidential-election-in-social-media-2020>

³⁴ <https://cusens.md/ro/reportaje/prezidentialele-facebook-2/>

³⁵ https://promolex.md/20679-raportul-nr-5-misiunea-de-observare-a-alegerilor-parlamentare-anticipate-din-11-iulie-2021/?lang=ro&__cf_chl_jschl_tk__=pmd_yGswDaHUbYlZsPcw_HroHqWPZnlrmOtpYdDm1dwSgRg-1635262978-0-ggNtZGzNAuWjcnBsZQJR

³⁶ 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS POST-ELECTORAL OPINION SURVEY, UNDP, https://www.md.undp.org/content/moldova/en/home/library/effective_governance/alegerile-prezidentiale-2020--sondaj-de-opinie-post-electoral.html



Photo by Kenny Eliason

Along with the increased online presence of candidates, there has been registered an increased number of web pages, groups of people set up as private or closed communities (Pro-Western and Pro-Eastern), primarily aimed at sharing like-minded ideas, messages, rhetoric and rarely encouraging open debates with the opposite supporters.

The authors of the IPP study “Odnoklassniki and Parliamentary elections” have concluded that the postings, especially during the electoral campaign, have resulted in higher interaction in all Odnoklassniki communities, thus, supporting the Pro-Eastern rhetoric. Moreover, the comments related to these posts were in contrast with the debates on electoral issues on Facebook. Odnoklassniki remains a bubble where the comments are almost exclusively influenced by emotions and the Pro-Eastern rationale, lacking the rationality that is sometimes displayed in similar discussions on Facebook.³⁷

Over the last years, due to social media algorithms and behaviour, the echo chamber phenomenon has taken deep roots that even people who seem to take neutral or constructive position in analyzing comprehensively and professionally the parties and candidates’ actions, especially during the campaign, have been publicly lynched and strongly criticized in the Moldovan media.³⁸

In this context, ***the echo chamber effect is severely hindering not only the pluralism and***

freedom of speech and opinion, but also the foundation of democracy, where debates, freedom of expression and dialogue are essential attributes.

With no exemption, ***the electoral contestants have used a diverse palette of digital phenomena during the electoral campaigns conducted within the 2016-2021 timeframe, including fake news, propaganda messages infiltrated in the news, fake accounts with troll behaviour, political memes*** (satire and humour), which have inflamed the socio-political polarization and the echo chamber effect among the pro-Western and pro-Eastern voter groups.

Although the parties have been invited to sign a voluntary Code of Conduct for campaigning, which included commitments to abide by electoral legislation, not incite discrimination, hatred, or violence in public speeches and in traditional and online media, and election materials, as per the OSCE Election Observation Report³⁹, only two parties agreed to abide by this Code.

Although an unprecedented mobilization among Diaspora members was recorded during the presidential and parliamentary elections held in 2020 and 2021, social media, along with the candidates and parties’ strategies, maintained the already created echo chambers, fuelling the polarization and limitation of open dialogue.

³⁷ Institute for Public Policy, 2019, ODNOKLASSNIKI ȘI ALEGERI PARLAMENTARE ÎN REPUBLICA MOLDOVA

³⁸ <https://anticoruptie.md/ro/blog/cenusa-dionis/suntem-prea-putini-ma-refer-la-cei-care-au-curajul-sa-spuna-ce-cred>

³⁹ <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/moldova/492601>

Presenting the results of the first qualitative study on echo chamber and digital phenomena in the electoral context of Moldova

UNDP Moldova has commissioned the first qualitative study on digital phenomena, including the echo chamber effect on the elections conducted in the Republic of Moldova.

Between August and September 2021

more than 270 people participated in a survey exercise. The survey covered four main areas:

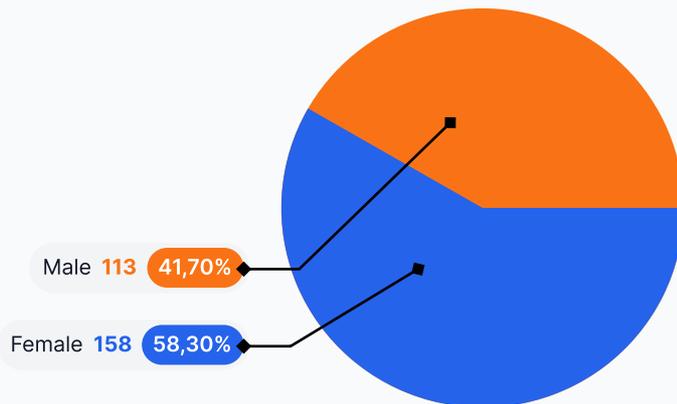
- ✓ general – social-demographic context (questions 1-7);
- ✓ digital specific – use of social media, opinions, level of knowledge regarding different digital phenomena, including echo chamber (questions 8-9);
- ✓ electoral driven – measuring attitudes, behaviours and opinions regarding social media and digital aspects of Moldovan elections (questions 10-16);
- ✓ action-oriented – recommendations and solutions for Moldovan stakeholders regarding the new digital elections (question 17).

The survey was conducted both online (via Google forms) and offline (hard copy questionnaire were disseminated amongst the participants), covering all regions of Moldova, including UTA Gagauzia (Annex).

From the socio-demographic perspective, almost 50% of respondents belong to the group of 26-40 year olds.

GROUP AGE	FACEBOOK USERS	PERCENTAGE, AGE DISTRIBUTION OF FACEBOOK USERS
16 - 18 years old	4	1,48%
19 - 25 years old	31	11,44%
26 - 40 years old	133	49,08%
41 - 55 years old	62	22,88%
56 - 70 years old	40	14,76%
71+ years old	1	14,76%

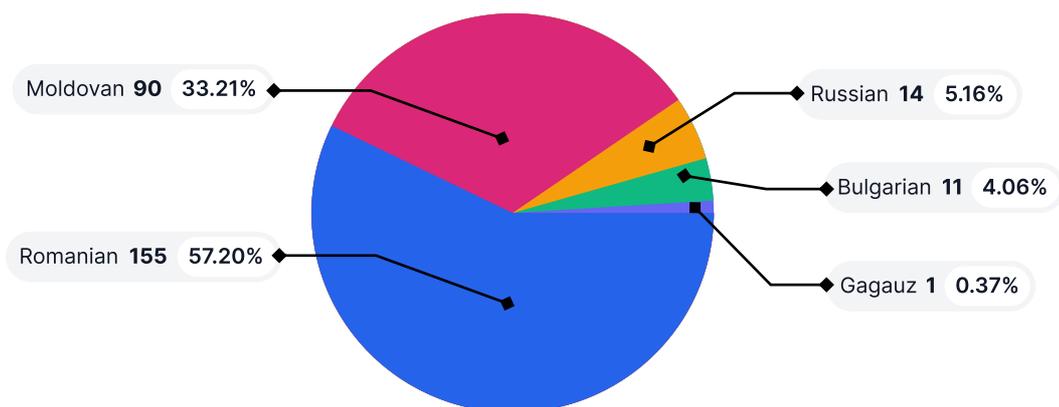
The analysis of gender disaggregated data revealed that more women participated in the survey or 58% of the total number of participants.



More than 40% of participants are economically active persons, whereas students, retired and unemployed persons made up almost 60% of the surveyed group.

In terms of ethnical identity and spoken language, ethnical Moldovans made up 49% of the total number of respondents, followed by the group of Romanians (40%), Bulgarians (7%), Russians (1%), Ukrainians, Gagauz people and Belarusians (0.74%).

57% of respondents have stated that Romanian is their primary spoken language, followed by 33% who mentioned that Moldovan is their primary spoken language, 5% stated the Russian and 4% – the Bulgarian language.

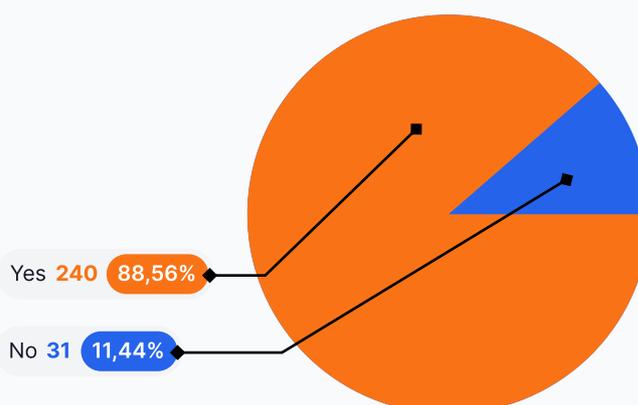


From the socio-demographic perspective, the survey is quite representative, as it covered different groups of populations from the age, gender, ethnicity and occupational perspective.

The purpose of questions on the digital area was to assess the level of social network use and familiarity with the digital phenomenon.

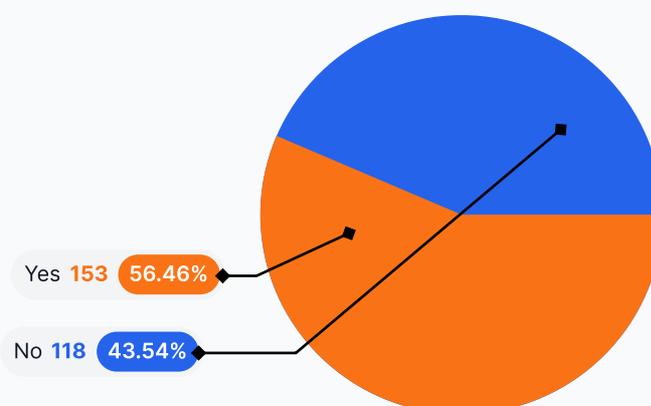
More than 86% of the surveyed persons have confirmed that they use social media platforms.

Do you use social networks?



When asked if they know what echo chamber is, around 56% of respondents have answered affirmatively.

Do you know what echo-chamber means?



The next group of questions was aimed to directly assess the population attitudes and opinions concerning the last elections from the social and digital perspective, measuring the respondents' feelings regarding polarization, division amongst different groups, quality of debates and communication during the electoral periods. Concurrently, it envisaged to evaluate what most common phenomena are spread during the electoral campaigns from the voters' perspective.

When being asked "During the last electoral campaigns (October 2020 – July 2021), how often did you see negative information and content related to the candidates and political parties you do not support on your Facebook account", 47% of respondents answered that quite often. At the same time, 43% responded that the occurrence was quite rare, while 10% answered they did not know.

As many as 21% of respondents used different social media options to block, hide, report or delete the persons who shared opposite contents, ideas and opinions during the last two elections, whereas 12% were blocked by other Facebook users for the same reason.

As the last electoral campaigns were mainly conducted through social media and in digital environments, the quality of debates among electoral candidates and voters, not only on TV, but also on digital media, had great importance and relevance.

Thus, when asked, "how would you rate the quality of debates and communication among various communities / groups of political supporters on Facebook", 61% of respondents noted that even though communication existed, the dialogue / debates were strongly emotional, with a lot of hate speech, personal attacks, discrimination, etc.

How would you rate the quality of debates and communication among various communities / groups of political supporters on Facebook:

It does not exist. Each group / community is closed, and, practically, there is no dialogue among parties.	44	16,24%
It exists, but the dialogue / debate is strongly emotional, with a lot of hate speech, personal attacks, discrimination, etc.	164	60,52%
It exists, the dialogue and debates are useful and constructive.	63	23,25%

The topic of polarization and division amongst various socio-economic and ethnic groups remains highly important in the electoral context of Moldova.

43% of respondents believe that polarization and division significantly increased during the last elections, while 32% think that polarization and division dropped.

The last, but not the least aspect assessed in this part was related to the most common digital phenomena observed during the electoral campaigns. The respondents were asked to choose three options out of the following list: trolling, fake news, political satire and meme, hate speech, echo chamber.

Fake news was the most common phenomenon, being selected by 204 respondents.

Trolling was the second phenomenon selected by 111 respondents, while echo chamber and hate speech were rated as the third option, each being listed by 100 respondents.



The Survey fourth block envisaged to identify the most feasible recommendations for all stakeholders to adopt the new digital reality and adapt it to the electoral process.

The respondents' options include recommendations for the public at large and concrete solutions for civil society organizations, public authorities and mass media.

Public at large:

- ✓ Electoral civic education.

- ✓ Encourage the users to flag and report various harmful digital practices: fake news, fake accounts, echo chamber, polarization and manipulation.

Civil society organization and mass media

- ✓ Develop the civil society representatives' expertise on digital and social phenomena.

Public authorities

- ✓ Amend the legal and digital framework.

Electoral civic education	185
Amend the legal and digital framework	137
Develop civil society representatives' expertise on digital and social phenomena.	212
Encourage the users of social networks to take control on the flow of news and engage in democratic debates and discussions with people that have different opinions and beliefs	59
Continuous capacity building of mass-media representatives to check electoral data / information, especially during the electoral campaigns	24
Encourage the users to flag and report various harmful digital practices: fake news, fake accounts, echo chamber, polarization and manipulation	137



Conclusions and recommendations

Digitalization, technical transformations and algorithms are no longer considered as future and ambiguous buzz words, as they started to shape our present, enabling a new digital and social future for our community.

Citizens and governments are entering into a new era, marked by volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous realities. The fast-paced construct, along with the structural, demographic, behavioural and social changes, boosts the need to adopt agility and flexibility, stressing at the same time the importance of fundamental human rights, fairness, democracy and security.

The behavioural and social outlook revealed that there is a strong dependency between how people communicate, interact, get informed and how they vote. In this respect, the results of the last elections held in Moldova, voters' profile, social and communication habits have shown that Moldova is inevitable following the world trend in going digital at the individual and community levels. The Moldovans get the information predominantly from the Internet and social media platforms, including during the electoral campaigns. At the same time, the Moldovans are exposed to manipulation and disinformation to a great extent due to socio-educational factors.

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In the regional context, Moldova is sharing the same challenges and opportunities as its neighbours – Romania and Ukraine – i.e. limited transparency of political ads financing on the Internet and social media, extensive usage of harmful digital practices, including disinformation, fake news, trolling, polarization on ethnical and social grounds, latent adoption of ethical principles for online and offline electoral campaigns, etc.

While the Eastern European countries have gradually started to acknowledge the importance of addressing the digital reality and the electoral cycle, many countries around the world have already taken critical and relevant actions in this respect, namely adopted specific media and electoral literacy curricula, established task forces, passed laws aimed to fight disinformation, fake news, foreign allegations, set up monitoring systems to encourage reporting of negative harmful phenomena. All of the above may serve as best practices for Moldova and the region in preparing for the next elections.

Both the desk research review and the survey on digital phenomena conducted in August – September 2021 revealed that:

- ✓ The shrinkage of Odnoklassniki user base favoured the increase of Facebook popularity in Moldova, which became the candidates' main electoral platform and one of the most important sources of information for voters;

- ✓ The increased number of groups and web pages is fuelling the electoral echo chamber effect. Neutral and constructive opinions and voices are dismissed due to mind-liked rhetoric and promoted ideas;

- ✓ Even though the dialogue and communication do exist during the electoral campaigns, it is strongly emotional, with a lot of hate speech, hatred and discrimination. The space allocated to open dialogue is insignificant;

- ✓ The feeling that the society is significantly polarized and divided increased during the last elections;

- ✓ Negative and denigrating means such as fake news, trolling, echo chamber and hate speech were exploited and used during all electoral campaigns.

In order to mitigate the negative effects of these phenomena, trying to explore the benefits and advantages of the new digital electoral reality to a greater extent, the Moldovan stakeholders have a set of options to consider, which was suggested by the participants to the first survey on the echo chamber and digital phenomena:

1. Develop and implement electoral/media/civic and digital education programmes and curricula.

DRIVE FOR ACTION

Although several electoral education campaigns were implemented in the past by civic stakeholders and the CEC ⁴⁰, according to the best practices and the survey outcomes, there is need to employ a more inclusive and consistent approach.

⁴⁰ CEC, 2009, Information and Civic Education Campaign, https://a.cec.md/ro/campania-de-informare-si-educatie-civica-2009-2783_88430.html#photo-gallery-4

As the Digital Readiness Assessment ⁴¹ report suggests, in order to harness the digital dividends at the societal level, there is a strong need to develop and implement an inclusive programme, targeting all social, ethnical and age groups, including the most vulnerable, across all Moldovan regions. In this respect, the CEC, together with Ministry of Education and the leading NGOs can work towards developing a comprehensive educational programme. Another important aspect is that electoral and digital programmes shall follow a more coherent approach, rather than be implemented only during the pre-election stages.

At the same time, schools and educational NGOs can further develop and promote debate clubs, organise hackathons to develop innovative solutions, etc.

2. Encourage the social media users to flag and report various harmful digital practices: fake news, fake accounts, echo chamber, polarization and manipulation.

DRIVE FOR ACTION

Nowadays, social media responsibility and digital ownership are important artefacts in the communication and interaction context. This measure would aim to minimize the algorithmic and behavioural bubble effects and incentivize at the same time the citizens to think critically and be digitally responsible.

Raising awareness about harmful events during the electoral cycles, as well as providing meaningful tools to users are critical responsibilities of the CEC and NGOs active in this area.

User friendly guides should be developed in this respect, explaining the mechanism of reporting and flagging the harmful events on social media platforms, so that people could identify and report them.⁴²

3. Develop digital and social phenomena expertise of civil society representatives.

DRIVE FOR ACTION

Lately, several leading media NGOs have taken the lead in developing and implementing tools and mechanisms aimed to prevent and fight fake news and disinformation. ⁴³ Also, during the electoral campaigns, civil society representatives started to pay closer attention to harmful digital events and monitor the candidates' actions in this respect.

⁴¹ Digital Readiness Assessment, 2021, UNDP, https://www.md.undp.org/content/moldova/en/home/library/effective_governance/digital-readiness-assessment-.html

⁴² A Beginner's Guide to Social Media Verification, 2021, https://www.bellingcat.com/resources/2021/11/01/a-beginners-guide-to-social-media-verification/?fbclid=IwAR0VXHsxspzHYyGWWFQVxUSRbiE7DkfK0mhGdWDlsp6i4CVbLAUCux8-m_A

⁴³ API, <https://stopfals.md/>

Although the CEC, together with the relevant national stakeholders, started to acknowledge the relevance and importance of the digital context in the electoral system, it is worth considering for the next polls the ways of amending the electoral legislation, including the Electoral Code, in the following areas:

- ✓ Electoral campaign, including the candidates' conduct on social media and digital platforms;

- ✓ Monitoring, reporting and financing electoral campaign actions, including high transparency of spending for the social and Internet related ads;

- ✓ Prevention of harmful digital events.

In this respect, the CEC can take into consideration both international and regional experience, employing the local experience and knowledge as well.

An important aspect is to review and adapt the CEC Communication and Visibility Strategy, while addressing the online and social media phenomena, and give an impetus to the change jointly with the media, electoral candidates, voters and the NGO community.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ UNDP, 2021, "How social media fuels echo chambering phenomenon in Moldova and how to address it?", <https://medium.com/undp-moldova/echo-chambers-what-are-these-and-how-they-affect-elections-in-moldova-eb19f26d9f5f>

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Questionnaire

This Questionnaire has been developed within the "Enhancing democracy in Moldova through inclusive and transparent elections" Project, implemented by UNDP Moldova, with the support from the American People provided through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The purpose of this Questionnaire is to assess the impact of negative digital contents (fake news, fake accounts, echo chamber effect, polarization and manipulation) on electoral processes and to identify the matters to be improved or amended for the next elections.

We shall ensure your anonymity and appreciate your sincerity!

Age: 16 – 18 18 – 24 25 – 34 >35

Gender: male Female

Current occupation: Student/school student Employed Unemployed Entrepreneur

Your ethnic group (a possible answer): _____

Which is the language spoken in your family? (a possible answer) : _____

Residence area: (a possible answer): Urban Rural

Region (a possible answer): North Centre South ATU Gagauzia

1. Do you use social networks?

Yes No

2. Do you know what echo-chamber means?

Yes No

3. During the last electoral campaigns (October 2020 – July 2021), how often did you see negative information and content related to the candidates and political parties you do not support on your Facebook account?

Very often Often Rare Very rare Do not know

4. During the last electoral campaigns, how often did you note or participate in online comments, debates or discussions with people who have different opinions, values or ideas?

Very often Often Rare Very rare Do not know

5. During the electoral periods of last autumn and this summer did you block/delete persons from the list of friends/reported other persons on Facebook because the information/content/their attitude was different from yours or of the group of supporters you belong to?

Yes No

6. Did someone block/delete you from the list of friends or report you because you expressed another opinion /idea or distributed information that did not match their beliefs/opinions?

Yes No

7. How would you rate the quality of debates and communication among various communities/groups of political supporters on Facebook:

It does not exist. Each group/community is closed, and, practically, there is no dialogue among parties;

It exists, but the dialogue/debate is strongly emotional, with a lot of hate speech, hatred, personal attacks, discrimination, etc.;

It exists; the dialogue and debates are useful and constructive.

8. Do you think that polarization/division among different group of voters has become lately

More intense; Less intense; Do not know.

9. In your opinion, which are three the most common digital phenomena noticed during the last electoral campaigns:

Troll

Fake news

Echo-chamber

Hate speech

Memes and political satire.

10. In your opinion, what would be the necessary solutions or actions to adopt and adapt the electoral process to the new digital reality in Moldova (Please, select at least three options):

- Electoral civic education;
- Amend the legal and digital framework;
- Develop the civil society representatives' expertise on digital and social phenomena;
- Encourage the users of social media to take control on the flow of news and engage in democratic debates and discussions with people who have different opinions and beliefs;
- Continuous capacity building of mass-media representatives to check electoral data/information, especially during the electoral campaigns;
- Encourage the users to flag and report various harmful digital practices: fake news, fake accounts, echo chamber effect, polarization and manipulation;
- Adjust the CEC Communication and Visibility Strategy, having tackled the online and social phenomena – echo chamber, fake news, manipulation, polarization, etc.

Thank you!



UNDP is the leading United Nations organization fighting to end the injustice of poverty, inequality, and climate change. Working with our broad network of experts and partners in 170 countries, we help nations to build integrated, lasting solutions for people and planet.

United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is the world's premier international development agency and a catalytic actor driving development results. USAID leads international development and humanitarian efforts to save lives, reduce poverty, strengthen democratic governance and help people progress beyond assistance.

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The content of this publication is the sole responsibility of the author and does not necessarily represent the views of the UNDP and USAID or the United States Government.