



How social media fuels echo chambering phenomenon in Moldova and how to address it?

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Table of Content

Ensuring a democratic electoral process in the era of digital and social media rise	04
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Echo-chambering – a global phenomenon	09
---------------------------------------	----

UK – Brexit referendum in 2016	09
--------------------------------	----

USA – Presidential Elections in 2020	11
--------------------------------------	----

Italy and Germany – Parliamentary Elections in 2013	12
---	----

The specifics and evolution of echo-chambering in Moldova	13
---	----

Conclusions and recommendations	18
---------------------------------	----

References	21
------------	----

Ensuring a democratic electoral process

in the era of digital and social media rise

Today, the **electoral processes** have to adopt and adapt to new realities, opportunities and challenges, which are mainly driven by new digital and social media context (PROTECTING ELECTORAL INTEGRITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE, 2020).

SOCIAL MEDIA

are found to contribute to pluralism, freedom of speech, free and fair elections, harnessing these democratic artefacts is becoming more challenging. It is widely acknowledge that platforms like **Facebook** and **Twitter** have changed the way .people are consuming information and sharing their opinions



SOURCE: WWW.UNSPLASH.COM

“Only fake people value fake news.”

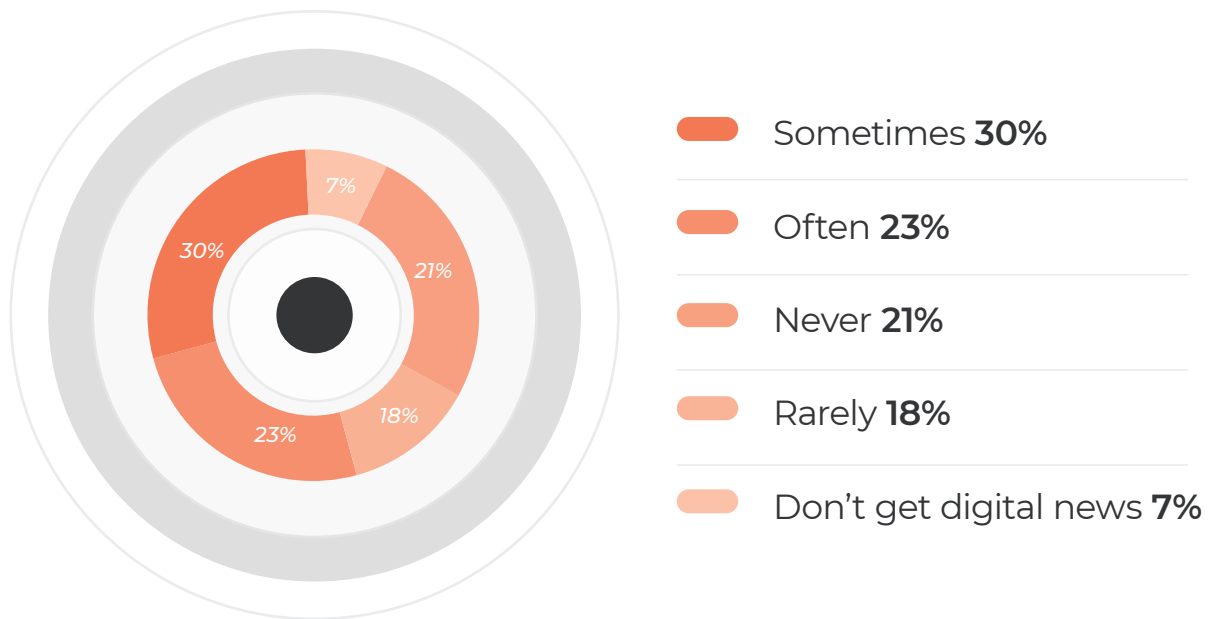
— **Oche Otorkpa**

According to the recent data, **53%** of American are accessing the news via social platforms.

At the same time, a worrying fact is that fake news are shared and posted much faster than real news on main social media platforms, which inevitably is contributing to the rise and spread of manipulation and disinformation amongst users.

ABOUT HALF OF AMERICANS GET NEWS ON SOCIAL MEDIA AT LEAST SOMETIMES

% of U.S. adults who get news from social media



Note: This chart is not comparable to similar questions in the past due to question wording changes; see Appendix for more details. Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 31 - Sept. 7 2020. "News use Across Media Platforms in 2020" — PEW RESEARCH CENTER



While this shift of media and information consumption habits and preferences can be considered as a "new digital reality", social media platforms have massively leveraged the digital momentum, by exploiting two main elements – human bias and machine learning.



SOURCE: WWW.UNSPLASH.COM

Behavioral bias and **algorithms** contribute to developing like-minded digital spaces. These isolated virtual environments are called echo chambers.

Echo chambers can be defined as environments in which the opinion, political leaning, or belief of users about a topic gets reinforced due to repeated interactions with peers or sources having similar tendencies and attitudes (Cinelli et al., 2021).

BEHAVIORAL BIAS

People tend to take into consideration what is similar or consistent with their systems of ideas and opinions and disregard data which does not correspond to their own beliefs. It is also in human nature to approve and accept opinions of likeminded groups. (Signele and Viola, 2019).

Fake News

ALGORITHMS

Algorithms and **filters** are used to perform complex and repetitive tasks involving millions of data entries, aiming at predicting behavior and making decisions. Some studies suggest, that digital users (*almost 60%*) are more prone to trust a search engine in comparison with a human being.

Based on similar mechanisms, **social media platforms** tracks multiple metrics, including the degree of affinity between the different users and the level of engagement their posts generate in order to create a personal timeline based on relevancy and previous activity on the platform (Neudert and Marchal, 2019).

HOW IT IS DONE

By using **this algorithmic mechanism**, social media creates a “proper digital context” for the echo chambers, thus users are reinforcing **their own opinions** and are never exposed to contrast and contradictory content. By allowing users to delimit themselves from other opinion groups and filter content, they are already predisposed to polarization and manipulation. Many experts suggest that with the rise and use of digital and social media vehicles, the political and social polarization and extremism has deepened and people become more divided.

(Neudert and Marchal, 2019; PROTECTING ELECTORAL INTEGRITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE, 2020)



Both researchers' community and civil society representatives are becoming more and more aware about the fact that echo chambering and other digital phenomena can hamper the fairness and freedom of the electoral mechanism and can alter, on the long term, the democratic development and stability in many countries.

**Doesn't matter what you write, matters who reads it, doesn't matter
if it's true, matters who believes it**

— *Dani J. Caile*

ECHO-CHAMBERING – a global phenomenon

While the phenomenon of echo chambering began to be studied quite recently, there are already several case studies on how the **social media bubbles** have influenced the electoral processes and outcomes.

One of most important characteristic of echo chambering is that it widely present both in mature democracies and developed states, such as USA, UK, Germany and Italy, as well as in developing and democratically emerging countries - Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.



UK – BREXIT REFERENDUM IN 2016

SOURCE: WWW.UNSPLASH.COM

Brexit referendum is considered one of the first “digital influenced” electoral event, where social media has played rather a controversial and critical role. One of the most analyzed and disputed case, was the tandem between Facebook and Cambridge Analytica.

The consulting company has used political micro-targeting, implying personal data of users, thus creating personalized and digital political ads and has influenced the persons’ electoral preferences (Ryabtsev, 2020).



ON TOP OF IT,

a post **Brexit** referendum analysis of **Twitter** user interaction has revealed that

69% 

pro-leave messages have been shared with like-minded users

68% 

of pro-remain messages have targeted other pro-remainers users



9% of tweets

posted by leave supporters were sent to the opposite group



10% of tweets

posted by pro-remain supporters have reached pro-leave supporters.

The findings add more weight to the idea that there were significant social media echo chambers during the build-up to the UK's EU referendum (Bastos, Mercea, and Baronchelli, 2018).

Additionally, researchers have found also interesting findings on **Facebook** interaction inside the **Pro Leavers** and **Pro Remainers** groups. Remainers were mostly communicating and interacting in well delimited digital spaces, while Leavers were implied in cross-ideological posting and comments targeting the Remainers, expressing negative emotions, such as anger, hatred and disunion. It was found that Leavers groups were more determined and “loud” in their interaction style. (Bossetta, Segesten and Trenz, 2018.)





USA – PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN 2020

SOURCE: WWW.UNSPLASH.COM

A flagship research, commissioned by NGO “Markup” has highlighted the strong correlation between the news consumption and echo chambering, especially during electoral campaigns. The study has compared the information and news preferences of 2601 people, both **democratic** and **republican** supporters. The findings were strongly supporting that the two groups live, interact and communicate in two separate digital worlds.

Facebook was more likely to show to **Democrat** supporters, content from **NPR**, **The New York Times**, **NBC News**, and **The Washington Post**, while **Republicans**, were exposed to news from **The Daily Wire** and **Fox News**, **CNSNews.com** and **Newsmax** (Sullivan M., 2021)

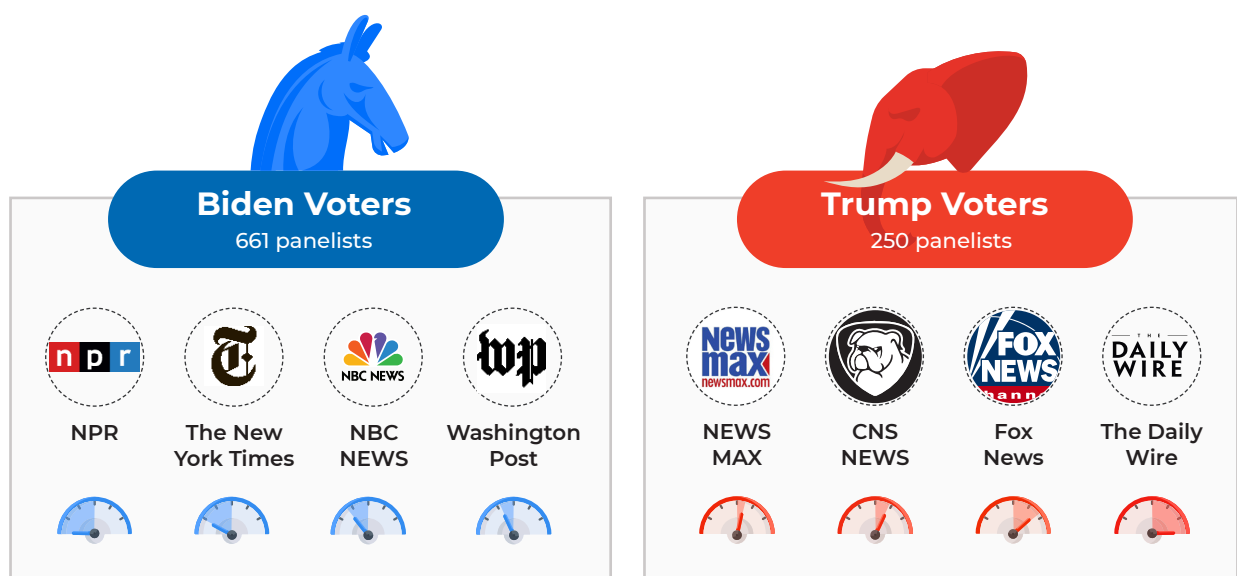


Figure 1. Patterns of news consumption in USA; Source: Shearer and Mitchell, 2021.

Additionally, Philips in his articles analyses the political strategies, used by Republicans. He highlights a curious fact that by using a mix vilification strategies, outrage, deceit and conspiracy theories, Republicans have actually, delimited its far right wing echo chamber from its moderate supporters, which have turned to have quite a limited potential of expansion and growth.

ITALY AND GERMANY – PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

2013

In contrast to UK and USA cases, where both countries have two parties political system, the Italian and German studies are particularly interesting, as they are bringing the perspectives of multiple parties



SOURCE: WWW.UNSPLASH.COM



SOURCE: WWW.UNSPLASH.COM

A group of researchers have studied **Twitter** users in Germany and Italy, during the Parliamentary election campaigns from 2013. One of the conclusions is that the vast majority of users have tended to integrate into communities, groups or networks that supported their opinions and visions, and less

or not at all in groups that would challenge or question their own visions. These certainly has favored the appearance and perpetuation of echo chambers. Also, the spaces where contradictory and plural opinions have been present, were rather an exception (Vaccari et al., 2016)



SOURCE: WWW.UNSPLASH.COM

THE SPECIFICS AND EVOLUTION OF **ECHO-** **CHAMBERING** IN MOLDOVA

As an emerging democracy and developing country, **Moldova** represents a compelling and specific case on new social/digital era and election processes.

In the last 5 years, news consumption habits, social media usage, as well as social media and online tactics and strategies of political parties and candidates have changed significantly.

According to the national study commissioned by Internews ,
**“Population of the Republic of
Moldova on Mass Media”**



SOURCE: WWW.UNSPLASH.COM



34%

of the respondents have mentioned that social media is their daily most preferred source of information



24%

of respondents perceive the information about socio-political topics published and promoted on social networks as false



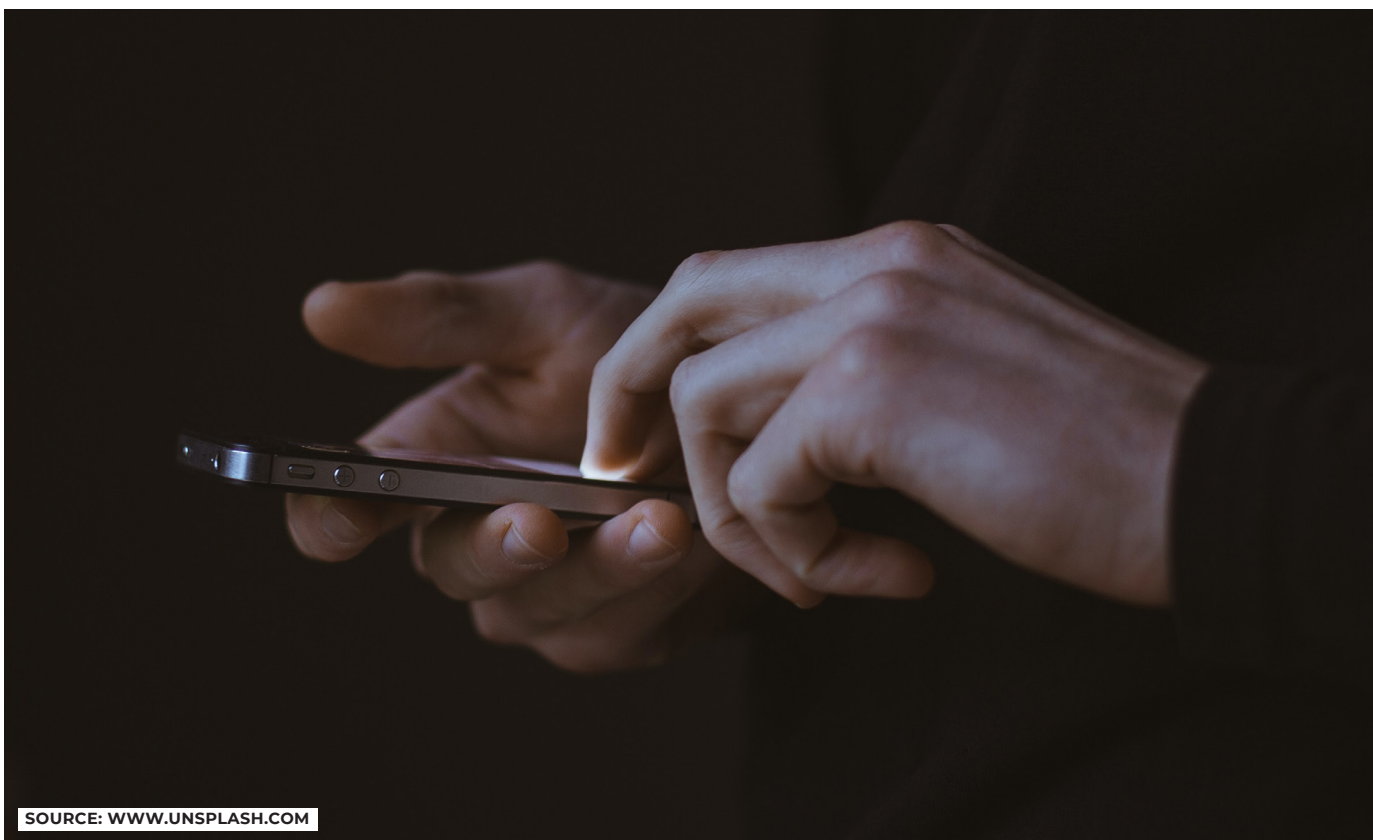
61%

think that Moldovans find difficult to extremely difficulty when it comes to differentiating fake from real news

Thus, Moldovan users and news consumers can be considered an easily manipulated and misinformed target (Budu.V, 2020).

The most popular social media platforms in Moldova

The most popular social media platforms among Moldovan users are **Facebook**, and **Odnoklassniki**. Although in 2018, both platforms were registering approximately the same number of users: **910,000 Facebook active members** and **885,860 members on Odnoklassniki**, by 2020, **Odnoklassniki** platform daily usage has **decreased with 28%** in, while **Facebook** has **increased with 15%**. An interesting fact is that Tik Tok has started to gain more popularity, especially amongst the young cohort of population (Agora, 2020).



SOURCE: WWW.UNSPLASH.COM

“Don’t say anything online that you wouldn’t want plastered on a billboard with your face on it.”

— Erin Bury

RESPONDEȚII CARE ACCESEAZĂ O DATĂ SAU DE CÂTEVA ORI PE ZI

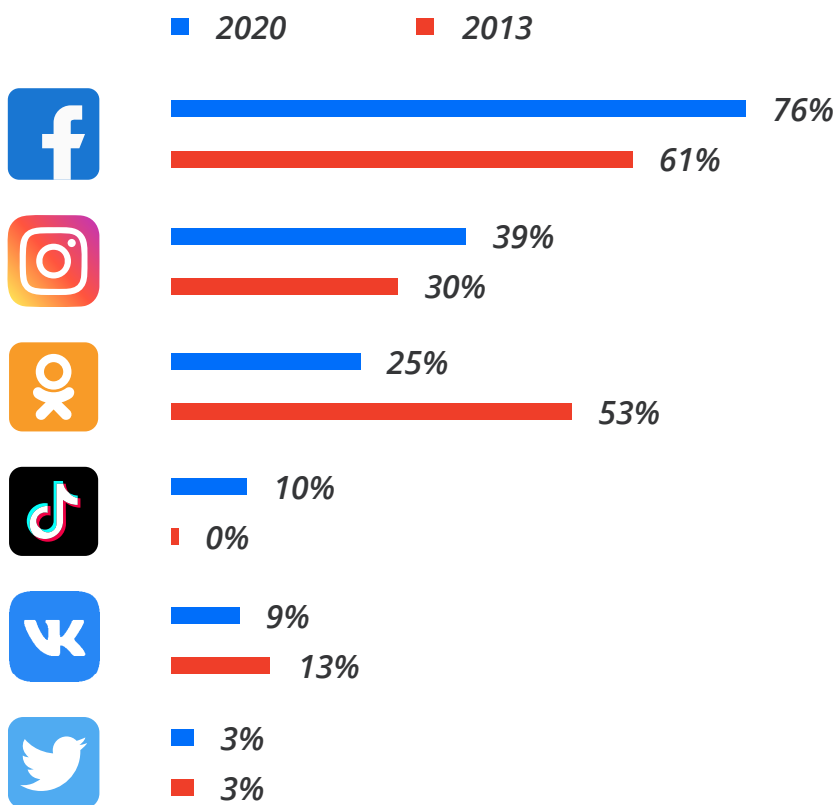


Figure 3. Comparative analysis of different social platform usage in Moldova, Source: Agora, 2020

In the 2016 election campaign, the polarization of society, the manipulation and spread of false news took place largely on social media networks. Active and strong communities have been created on **Facebook** to support the Pro Western candidate, at the same time the supporters of other candidate have used the communities already created to promote political messages on **Odnoklssniki**.

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



Also, people who did not agree or disagreed with the contradictory opinions, messages or news were unfriending, unfollowing or blocking the peers, thus limiting even more space for communication and dialogue.

At one time, there was an initiative called “Adopt an Odnoklassnik”. The aim was to interact directly with several social strata on social 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.

In contrast with the 2016 elections, the echo chambering phenomenon in Presidential Elections from 2020, have several distinct specifics – the decline of **Odnoklassniki**, rise of **Facebook** and pandemic context.

With the decrease of **Odnoklassniki** popularity amongst Pro-Eastern communities, these groups have started to stagnate and be less active on this platform. (Institute for Public Policy, 2019). Subsequently, this has set up a new digital and social media scene for the electoral campaign, turning Facebook in the main “electoral battle space”.

According to the “**Presidential Elections – monitoring report on social media**”, 2021, **Facebook** was the **most used social media platform by candidates**. Additionally, the pandemic restrictions have “forced” the candidates to reconsider the classical and traditional electoral tactics, while focusing more on digital and social media methods.

These findings have been also highlighted in UNDP study - 2020 Presidential Elections. Post-electoral Opinion Survey, which has concluded that social media was the third most used source of information during electoral campaign, after TV shows and spots on TV. The interaction on social media has increased 10 times for final candidates in 2020 in comparison with 2016.

The experts have suggested that the recent electoral campaign have extensively exploited a complex and varied mix of disinformation and manipulation tactics, including fake news, propaganda messages infiltrated in the news, fake accounts with troll behavior, political memes (satire and humor), which have resulted in higher polarization and echo chambering among pro-Western and pro-Eastern voter groups.

The echo chambering effects have been also leveraged by the multitude groups, sometimes set up as private or closed communities (pro-Western and pro-Eastern), primarily aiming at sharing like-minded ideas, messages, rhetoric and rarely encouraging open debate with the opposite supporters.

Unfortunately, during pandemic, the same geopolitical driven disinformation narratives have deepened the polarization. The main socio-political catalyst in Moldova is the feeling of insecurity, which is based on the current international environment and the geopolitical contradictions between East and West (Stercul,2020).

In 2020, final candidates have used some of the old manipulation and disinformation tactics, from 2016. Some of these strategies have been adapted to the pandemic context, and others have remained intact. One of the vivid examples was repurpose of the geopolitical tensions between East and West tactics coupled with Orthodox values and lockdown and restrictions context. The Syrian migration topics has been replaced by the fake news that if Pro Western candidate, becomes president, she “will close the country following the example of EU countries. (Calugareanu, 2020).

Although the Presidential Elections 2020 have registered an unprecedentedly mobilization among diaspora members, the social media construct coupled with candidates strategies have maintained the already created echo chambers. This has ultimately deepened the gap in communication and debate between final candidates supporters and has fueled the socio-ethnic and political division between Moldovan people.



Conclusions and recommendations

The digital and online revolution has changed the way people interact, communicate, learn, get informed and ultimately elect and vote. Although the new digital age has come with many benefits and advantages for all stakeholders, unfortunately it brought also many challenges and dangers.

Social media and online phenomena, such echo chambering, trolling, disinformation and fake news are just a few “agent of changes” for democratic stability and electoral fairness. Based on the theoretical outlook, global and national case studies, presented in this paper, the following conclusions and key lessons learnt can be outlined:

1

Echo chambering is quite a complex topic, combining both psychological, emotional, behavioral and technological elements;

2

The construct of social media platforms, especially Facebook and Twitter favor the appearance and the multiplication of echo chambers;

3

All the countries, irrespectively of democratic maturity and economic development are impacted by this phenomenon;

4

Although the researchers community and NGOs have started to analyze more in-depth echo chambering, private and public stakeholders need to engage also actively in discussions, joint actions and awareness raising;

5

Moldova is witnessing also a quite visible digital change and shift in user habits – every third media consumer is using social platform as main source of information. Moldovans are extremely exposed to disinformation and manipulation, lately Facebook has become the most popular social media platform, while Odnoklassniki has declined both as daily usage, as well as active accounts.

6

The Moldovan political landscape has adapted to the new digital reality, increasing its presence on online and social media platforms. Parties and candidates have exploited different electoral strategies and tactics, including dissemination of fake news, satire, trolling, hate speech, etc. At the same time, the preferences for group creation has favored echo chambering on Facebook and has created “favorable ground” for further polarization and social division.

7

There are strong evidences that parties and candidates will most probably use same or slightly adapted techniques for the early Parliamentary Elections 2021. The perpetuation of echo chambering, especially on Facebook is extremely likely.

In this context, a series of recommendations can help both public authorities and civic community to be better equipped on short and long run, in order to ensure fair and free elections in the digital and online context:

General

- Create national partnerships with both public and civic stakeholders in defending the integrity of elections against echo chambering, disinformation, hate speech, manipulation and polarization;
- Amend Electoral Code and/or other electoral related policies in order to reflect the specifics of digital electoral campaigns;
- Oblige social media platforms to disclose all information involved in the purchase of an ad, including the real identity of advertiser, amount spent, targeting criteria, and actual ad creative (PROTECTING ELECTORAL INTEGRITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE, 2020).

CEC/CICDE

- Build the capacities of CEC and CICDE in new digital electoral campaign and voter information context;
- Adapt CEC Communication and Visibility Strategy, while addressing the online and social media phenomena – echo chambering, fake news, manipulation, polarization, etc.;
- Adapt the existing curriculum of CICDE with the new digital electoral campaign and voter information context.

Mass media, NGOs and population at large

- Create and implement digital and media literacy programs for different groups of population;
- Develop youngsters and children capacities for debate and critical thinking;
- Continuously build civil society watch dog capacity during electoral campaigns, with a focus on digital and online monitoring;
- Develop the expertise of various civic stakeholders on digital and social media phenomena;
- Encourage social media users to take control of their news feed and democratically engage in debates and discussions with people, who display other opinions and beliefs;
- Further develop and strengthen mass media capability in fact checking, especially during the electoral campaign period;
- Encourage users to flag and report different digital harmful practices: fake news, fake accounts, echo chambering practices, polarization and manipulation.

Candidates and parties

- Disclose and submit documentation, facts and evidences regarding all on advertisements to the relevant public authorities (APPG, 2020);
- Adhere to a Digital Code of Conduct and Integrity during elections and/or encourage electoral stakeholders to sign a pledge to reject deceptive digital campaign practice.

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