

ELECTIONS AND REFERENDUM IN MOLDOVA: PERCEPTION IN RUSSIAN MEDIA AND SOCIAL NETWORKS



iikar

The Institute for Conflict Studies and Analysis of Russia

Comprehensive AI-powered media analysis

RESEARCH RESUME

Since the official launch of the electoral campaign in Moldova in August 2024, Russian propaganda, media outlets, and social networks have engaged in extensive discussions concerning the elections. This is confirmed by the analysis of messages on Russian TV channels and video platforms, using the specialized AI-powered tool War of Words and AI-powered platform Osavul for comprehensive social media research.

Russian television has frequently featured presidential candidates, with a notable emphasis on Maia Sandu, compared to the opposition candidate, Alexander Stoianoglo, and other political figures. This heightened focus on Moldova's pro-European president reflects a strategic effort to cultivate a negative perception of Maia Sandu within the Russian audience.

The discourse surrounding the Moldovan elections closely intersects with the Transnistria issue on propaganda channels and the RuTube platform. Notably, references to Transnistria during the pre-election campaign often exceeded those related to the elections themselves.

In addition to the discussions on TV channels, social networks in Russia became a place for vibrant discussions regarding the presidential elections and the referendum in Moldova. On the day of voting, Telegram messages about the Moldovan presidential elections garnered over 2 million views.

The total view count for messages in the Russian segment of Telegram on October 20-21 surpassed 4.35 million, accompanied by more than 81 thousand reactions.

As noted in the propaganda broadcasts, conversations about Maia Sandu largely prevailed in the Russian Telegram space, significantly outnumbering discussions about Alexander Stoianoglo and other candidates.

Among the 482 sources that reported on the Moldovan elections during the voting and counting period, 150 Telegram channels demonstrated connections with Kremlin information campaigns and public opinion manipulation strategies aimed at influencing audiences.

Notably, the engagement of these compromised sources during the Moldovan election coverage was double the average involvement seen in other influence operations, which typically hovers around 15%.

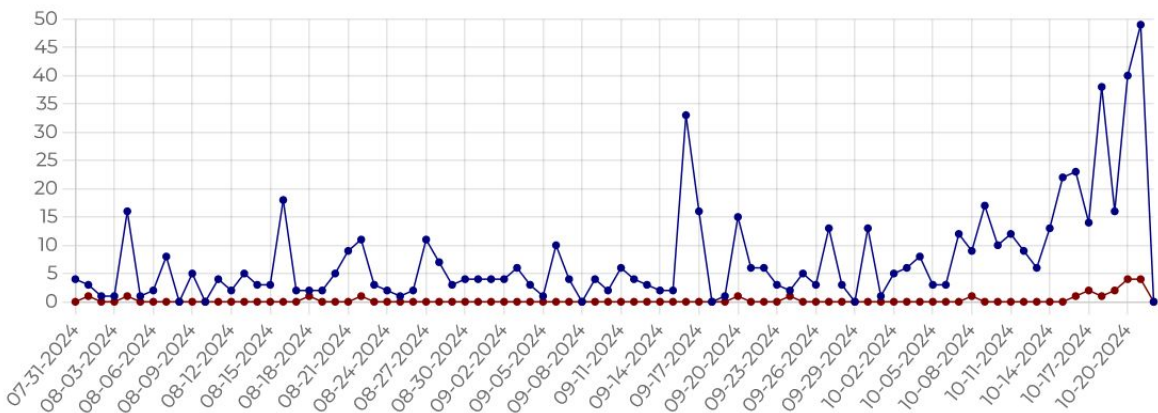
On election day, this engagement rate exceeded 31%.

ELECTIONS IN MOLDOVA ON RUSSIAN TV

On October 20, Moldova held presidential elections and a referendum on joining the European Union. After the voting, current President Maia Sandu and opposition candidate Alexandr Stoianoglo get to the second round, set for November 3, 2024. Additionally, by a small margin, Moldovan citizens supported the country's European path and decided to pursue EU integration.

Since the official campaign launch in August 2024, the elections in Moldova have attracted media attention and sparked active discussions on Russian social networks. The graph below clearly indicates that topics related to Maia Sandu (blue line) received much more coverage than discussions of opposition candidate Alexandr Stoianoglo (red line).

Figure 1. Discussion of candidates on Russian TV and RuTube.

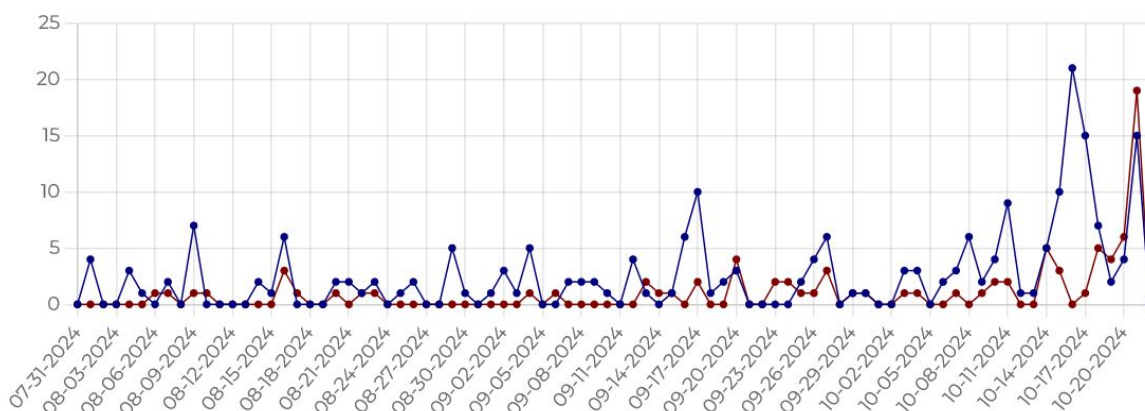


COMPARISON OF DISCUSSIONS ON ELECTIONS AND TRANSNISTRIA

Since Moldova gained independence in 1991, the Kremlin sought to preserve its influence over the country using various methods. One key tool was support for the breakaway region of Transnistria, where around 1,500 Russian contract soldiers continue to serve.

The mentions graph shows that the topic of Transnistria (blue line) received significant coverage on propaganda channels and the RuTube platform, sometimes even surpassing the mentions of the presidential elections in Moldova (red line). This highlights how important this issue remains in the Russian information space.

Figure 2. Comparing mentions of Elections and Transnistria in Russian TV.



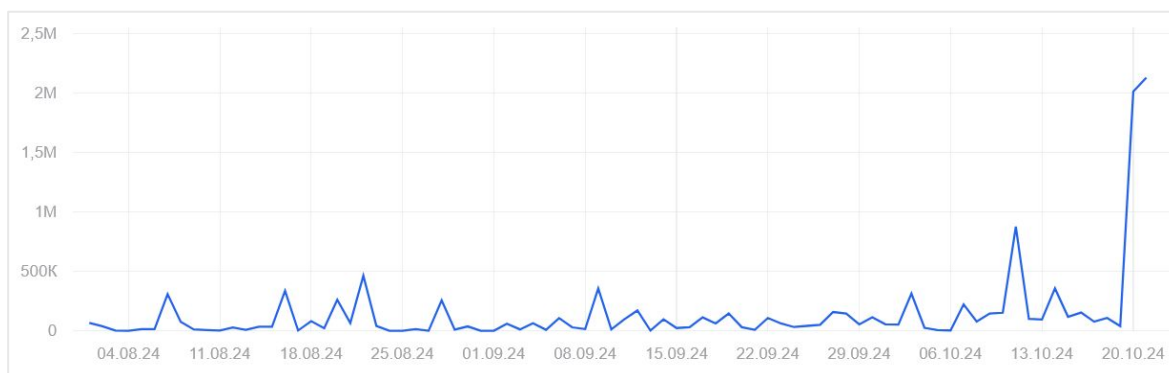
MOLDOVAN ELECTIONS AND REFERENDUM ON TELEGRAM

In addition to intense discussions on propaganda television programs, the presidential elections and referendum in Moldova also became a topic of active debate on Russian social networks.

On election day, Telegram messages related to the presidential elections in Moldova attracted more than 2 million views. However, interest in this topic in the Russian information space has remained high since the beginning of the election campaign.

The timeline of election coverage outlines a clear sequence of key events driving the interest of Russian audiences, including reports from Kremlin propaganda media. An important moment occurred on August 7, when the pro-Russian "Victory" bloc, led by Ilan Shor, would not be registered to participate in the elections and referendum. Considerable interest was sparked by the meeting of German Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Chisinau on August 21, along with Transnistria's proposal to hold a referendum on its territory.

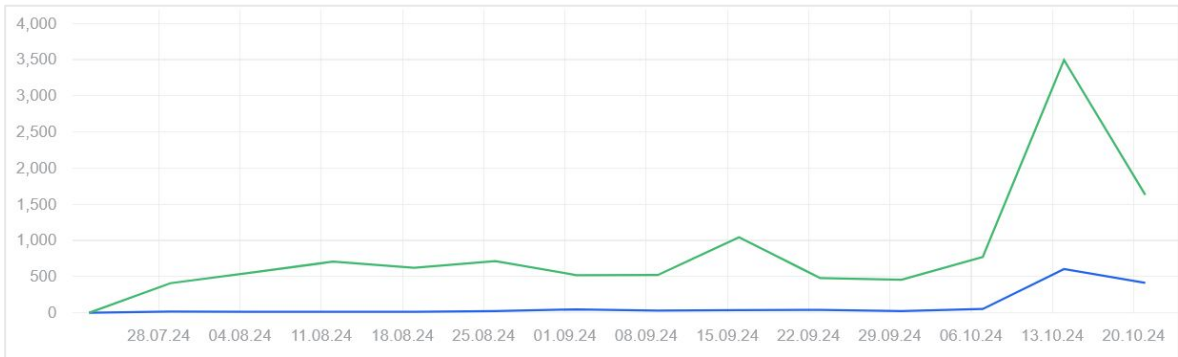
Figure 3. Number of views of Telegram messages about elections in Moldova.



KREMLIN'S INFORMATION CAMPAIGN AGAINST SANDU

Like in propaganda television programs, topics related to Maia Sandu (green line) appeared much more frequently in the Russian Telegram segment than opposition candidate Alexandr Stoianoglo (blue line). The comparative analysis of publication counts in the graph below indicates that the Russian information campaign focused mainly on Sandu. This approach seems aimed at shaping a negative perception of the current president among the Russian audience.

Figure 4. Number of Telegram publications about candidates Sandu and Stoianoglo.



It is important to note that among the 482 sources covering the elections during the voting and counting period on October 20-21, 150 Telegram channels were compromised. These channels are linked to Kremlin information campaigns and public opinion manipulation to influence the audience.

During October 20-21, the total number of views for related messages in the Russian segment of Telegram exceeded 4.35 million, while the number of reactions surpassed 81 thousand. Propaganda channels garnered the most attention, particularly “Topor-live,” which has an audience of over 4.28 million readers, and “Operation Z: War Correspondents of the Russian Spring,” with more than 1.5 million followers.