

**Ways of Projecting the Image of the President of the Republic of
Moldova in the International Press from the West and the East.
Comparative Study**

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Abstract

The study had as its general research objective the identification of ways to reflect Moldovan reality and project the image of the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, in Western and Eastern media. In order to achieve this goal, two news agencies were selected – *Agerpres* from Romania and *RIA Novosti* from the Russian Federation. The rationale for their selection is that both press institutions are official bodies and develop their information policies in accordance with the state's official position. Consequently, the way the media present internal and, especially external reality is constantly shaped through the prism of state interests and correlates with the objectives of its foreign policy. The main research methods were content analysis, which provided the possibility of collecting quantitative-qualitative data on media products from and about the Moldovan reality, put into the information circuit by each agency, and comparative analysis, which allowed the interpretation of the data obtained and the identification of similarities and dissimilarities in the activity of these two media institutions. The research results have shown that the ways in which the reality and the activity of the president of one state are reflected in the press of another state are, as a rule, directly proportional to the nature of the bilateral relations between the respective states. Media institutions, especially those owned by the state, operate on a specific agenda they systematically promote, though this agenda is frequently influenced by the political and economic interests of the country or the ruling elite.

Keywords: news agency, *Agerpres*, *RIA Novosti*, public image, country's president.

Introduction

The public image of any political leader, including a president, is shaped and updated by the actions he/she takes, the speeches he/she gives, the statements he/she makes, the visits he/she makes, etc. However, the evolution of the public image of a president is not only influenced by the essence of his/her activity, but also by the way in which that activity is reflected and interpreted in the media. "In contemporary society, citizens form their opinions about

politicians more on the basis of their symbolic representation in the media than through direct contact with them. Ideology and programs, which constitute the foundations of political communication between the leader and the masses, are increasingly replaced by the image of the politician, created and disseminated in the media” (Micotina, 2008).

The media valorises the socio-political reality and transforms it into media images – sequences from which “... a conventional, generally accepted reality from a social point of view is formed, to which the social individual in particular and, as a whole, the community or even the entire society relate” (Stepanov 2018, 23). Precisely for this reason, the way in which the activities of a political leader are reflected in the media and the angle of approach to the events in which he/she is involved are determined for the formation/deformation or strengthening/undermining of his/her public image. “...A communication channel is a media mediator that has a certain audience prone to showing loyalty to the promoted political image. Therefore, the authority of the media, which influences the audience at the time of dissemination of the information product, can significantly affect, both positively and negatively, the perception of the information — in our case, the perception of the image of the political leader” (Nikisina, 2020).

The way a state leader is represented in international media leaves its mark on the state's overall image, world standing, foreign policy, and the evolution of its relations with other countries. The projection of the image of the country's president in the international press also influences the processes of configuration in the consciousness of the masses, producing synthetic, unitary images of this country and shaping collective perceptions and the general attitude of the international community towards the people led by this leader. The mediated image of the first man in the state and the psychological portrait of the nation are deeply interconnected subjects, which are reflected in the consciousness of the masses, influencing their representations. By implication, “... in the mediated image of the leader of a state, the cultural code of this state is projected” (Lipatova, 2022). In this regard, the ratio of positive to negative information about a state's leader, circulated by international mass media, is decisive in shaping public opinion and public representations abroad regarding this political figure.

Internationally, the president of the country is the supreme representative of the state; therefore, his/her strong and constructive presence in the global press can support diplomatic and economic efforts and, thus, can contribute to attracting foreign investments, strengthening trade relations, and strengthening the country's position in various international organisations. The media approach from a positive perspective of the activity, involvement and positioning of the president of the country in national and international issues updates and strengthens his/her image, while the media approach with a predominantly negative substratum, on the contrary, distorts it and, by implication, also affects the image of the country as a whole. Thus, the way in which the actions taken by a country's president, the processes in which he/she is involved, and the events in which he/she participates are reflected can influence his/her public image, determining whether it is positively or negatively distorted.

Materials and Methods

The main objective of the study is to identify how the activities of the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, are reflected and to ascertain how her image is projected in international media in the East and the West. For the analysis, we selected two news agencies: one from Romania and the other from the Russian Federation. These are the institutions specialised in producing international information, *RIA Novosti*, managed by the Government

of the Russian Federation, and the National Press Agency *Agerpres* from Romania. The logic of their selection arose from the fact that both press institutions are official and both develop their information policy in accordance with the official position of the state; thus, the way in which the internal reality, but especially the external one, is mediated is always conceived through the prism of the interests of the state, being correlated with the objectives of its foreign policy.

The activity of agencies was researched through direct monitoring of the news flow fed into the information circuit for three months (01.12.2023-29.02.2024). The research period was chosen because the most accurate results can be obtained from information collected during periods of ordinary stability, such as the last month of 2023 and the first two months of 2024. However, the subsequent months of 2024, given that it was an electoral year, were marked by heightened political turbulence, which also affected media activity.

The study was conducted using four analysis criteria, each with its own set of research variables. The first criterion – *the narrative context in which the information was presented* – comprised 3 research variables: *positive, negative, and neutral*. The second criterion – *the number of information sources used in the journalistic material* – had 3 categories: *1 source, 2 sources, and 3 or more sources*. The third criterion – *the techniques used to project the image of the political leader* – comprised 4 research variables: *blatant lies, repetition of information, affirmations, and indications of the enemy*. And the last criterion – *the images adjacent to the text* – had 4 research variables: *photograph, symbol-image, graphic image, and no image*.

Results and Discussion

The analysis confirms that media institutions, especially official or state-owned ones, have specific editorial agendas whose configuration is frequently influenced by the political and economic interests of the state or the ruling elites. This fact determines the institutional style of communication, namely the selection and prioritisation of topics, the angle of approach to the issue and the manner of presenting the facts. The state's ability to influence the decision-making process within the mass media can significantly interfere with how reality is interpreted and presented, since the media image, in essence, constitutes a subjective perspective on reality. "The reality described by the image does not overlap with reality as such, but is a point of view on it. This fact has generated a series of theoretical analyses, from Daniel Boorstein to René Berger or Jacques Ellul, regarding the relationship between reality and *the false reality* created by the images circulated by the mass media. This *false reality* that substitutes reality is the point of view of a community or a part of that community, or, simply, the attitude of a producer. And here one of the most unpredictable consequences appears, because the mass media can be used for the obvious purpose of imposing a point of view on reality, a certain mechanism of action..." (Bacos, 1992, p.23).

The news agencies *Agerpres* and *RIA Novosti* – institutions that constitute the research object of this study- produced, during the monitored period, 45 materials about the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu: the institution in Romania produced 15 materials, and the one in the Russian Federation produced 30 materials. The comparative analysis of the data highlights that *RIA Novosti* produced twice as many materials as *Agerpres*, demonstrating the Russian agency's heightened interest in Moldovan reality. Considering that *RIA Novosti* is a state media institution that reflects the official position of the Kremlin, it can be deduced that, despite the public statements of the Russian authorities, the Russian Federation remains interested in the political and socio-economic developments in the

Republic of Moldova. Both quantitatively and, in particular, qualitatively, this indicator confirms the persistence of increased attention from Moscow to the internal dynamics of our country and to the actions of the head of state, Maia Sandu.

Both *Agerpres* and *RIA Novosti* presented the socio-political reality of the Republic of Moldova and the activities of President Maia Sandu through informative content, exclusively in the form of news.

The first analysis criterion was *the context in which information about the activity of the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, was presented*. The importance of this criterion lies in the fact that the editorial context in which the factual information is placed gives significance to the journalistic content. Editorial context is one of the factors that can amplify or, conversely, diminish the effects of journalistic content intended to shape and transform the image of a political leader. "In addition to the need for it to be current, the presence of a creative and innovative component is also required. The simple transmission of strictly factual information becomes devoid of impact; it must be creatively processed and transformed by the author in order to gain efficiency in relation to the target audience" (Jumaliev 2022, 193) and placed in a certain editorial context. However, the positive context emphasises the political leader's qualities and achievements, creating a friendly and attractive image for readers, whereas the negative context highlights the shortcomings, failures, and controversial aspects of the leader's activities, influencing the public's perception in an unfavourable manner. Unlike the first two, the neutral context reports the information as such, without assigning specific connotations or interpretations, which ensures a less spectacular but more objective and balanced reflection. From the perspective of this criterion, the activity of *Agerpres* and that of *RIA Novosti* differ significantly (see table 1).

Table 1. Narrative Contexts in Which Information About the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, Was Placed, in Journalistic Materials Circulated by *Agerpres* and *RIA Novosti*

Context in Which Information Was Placed	Positive Context	Negative Context	Neutral Context
Institutions			
<i>Agerpres</i>	7	1	7
%	46.65%	6.7%	46.65%
<i>RIA Novosti</i>	0	23	7
%	0	76.67%	23.33%

Source: *Elaborated by the author*

The analysis showed that, during the monitored period, *Agerpres* circulated 7 news items in which factual information was presented in a positive context, accounting for 46.65% of the total number of materials produced. Also, across seven news items, the data were presented in a neutral context, with a percentage similar to the previous one (46.65), and only one item presented the data in a negative context, accounting for 6.7%.

The situation is different in the case of *RIA Novosti*. The reality in the Republic of Moldova was presented in a negative context in 23 news items, out of a total of 30 journalistic

materials circulated during the monitored period, and in a neutral context in 7 news items, representing 23.3% of the total number of materials analysed. We note that during the stated period, *RIA Novosti* did not distribute any materials with a positive context. The fact that more than two-thirds of the total analyzed products – 76.7% – reflected things from a predominantly negative perspective allows us to state that the respective institution consciously oriented its activity to feed the impressions that the situation in the Republic of Moldova is precarious, to shape negative views on the activity of the President of the Republic of Moldova in order to distort her image and influence the electoral spirit of the Russian diaspora.

The comparative analysis of the obtained results demonstrates that *Agerpres* reflected reality from a positive-neutral perspective, which denotes a friendly, but objective attitude of Romania towards our country, while *RIA Novosti* approached things from a primarily negative perspective, the respective angle of approach being projected through the prism of the official policy of the Russian Federation towards the Republic of Moldova and its president.

The second analysis criterion is *the number of information sources used in the journalistic material*. The research conducted from the perspective of that criterion shows us that, in the indicated time interval, out of the total of 45 materials circulated by the two agencies, 33 news items were based on only one source of information, which represents 73.3%; 10 news items – based on two sources of information, which represents 22.2% and only two news items, i.e., 4.5%, were based on three or more sources (see table no. 2).

Table 2. Number of Information Sources Used in Journalistic Materials About the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, Circulated by *Agerpres* and *RIA Novosti*

Number of Information Sources Used in Journalistic Material	1 Source	2 sources	3 and More Sources
Institutions			
<i>Agerpres</i>	7	6	2
%	46.7%	40%	13.3%
<i>RIA Novosti</i>	26	4	0
%	86.67	13.33%	0

Source: *Elaborated by the author*

It is observed that most of the news distributed by both *Agerpres* and *RIA Novosti* was produced based on a single source of information. However, the considerable differences between the numbers of materials produced by the respective institutions with one source and with two sources stand out. Thus, if the ratio between these two categories of news, in the case of *Agerpres*, is insignificant, constituting 46.7% and, respectively, 40.0% of the total of 100% of materials produced, in the case of *RIA Novosti*, it denotes an impressive gap: 86.7% is accounted for by materials with one source, and only 13.3% – by those with two sources. It is worth noting that news with three or more sources was produced and distributed only by the *Agerpres* agency, accounting for 13.3%.

The fact that more than half of the materials distributed by *Agerpres* were based on at least two sources of information allows us to conclude that the journalists from this institution documented themselves more thoroughly and reflected the Moldovan reality in a more complex and balanced way than those from *RIA Novosti*, who, in most cases, reflected the events in the Republic of Moldova based on a single source, more than three-quarters of the total materials produced by them being in this category. This, as well as the fact that *RIA Novosti* did not broadcast any material based on three or more sources of documentation, indicates that journalists at this institution approach Moldovan reality superficially, often presenting it unilaterally and manipulating public opinion. Such an approach can create an inaccurate picture of the mediated reality, which, in turn, can distort people's perceptions of the head of state's activities.

At the same time, it was also noted that the sources used by *Agerpres* journalists were more credible, being, most often, official sources, while those from *RIA Novosti* predominantly used unofficial sources – representatives of the opposition in Chisinau or experts with pro-Russian views, who, as a rule, made provocative political statements and vehemently criticized the activity of the forces in power, led by Maia Sandu. Thus, the research highlighted *RIA Novosti*'s tendency to select information sources in ways that reflect Moldovan political reality. Used frequently and systematically, the technique in question, belonging to the category of manipulation techniques, leads to the construction of a pseudo-reality about the President of the Republic of Moldova and the distortion of her image in the international information space.

The next criterion to be analysed aimed to identify the dominant techniques used by journalists from these two agencies to reflect Moldovan reality and project the image of the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu. Four techniques were selected as research variables: repetition of information, affirmation, blatant lie and indication of the enemy. This selection resulted from the belief that the public's representations of political actors or of the mediated reality are shaped by dominant media discourses, depending on the techniques journalists use. "Representations indicate from this point of view the construction – through language and discourse – of certain attributes of events and actors, which can lead to a certain understanding of reality, and can generate certain power relations" (Beciu 2016, 246-247).

Therefore, from the perspective of the third criterion, as in the case of the first two, the activity of *Agerpres* and that of *RIA Novosti* differ significantly (see table no. 3).

Table 3. Techniques Used by *Agerpres* and *RIA Novosti* to Project an Image of the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu

Technique Used to Project Image of the Country's President	Information's Repetition	Affirmation	Blatant Lie	Enemy's Indication
Media Institution				
<i>Agerpres</i>	4	1	0	0
<i>RIA Novosti</i>	4	19	10	8

Source: *Elaborated by the author*

The analysis showed that over three months, *Agerpres* used the techniques of forming the image of a leader only five times, while *RIA Novosti* used them 41 times. It is noted that the

number of techniques identified in RIA Novosti's content exceeds the number of materials produced, as some news items used 2 or more of these techniques.

Determining the degree of use of the respective techniques in a media agency's products clearly indicates the real objectives it pursues in relation to the media object. Thus, the low level of use of these techniques in Agerpres news gives us grounds to state that the institution in question focuses its activity on a simple, neutral reflection of the events in which President Sandu is involved, without trying to influence her image in any way. However, the analysis demonstrated that in most cases, Agerpres portrayed Maia Sandu's activity in a positive light, thereby strengthening her international image. The headlines of news published by this agency can also serve as proof: *Maia Sandu – Visit to Timiș and Arad; Will Have a Meeting With Her Majesty Margareta and Will Receive an Award from Timișoara City Hall* (Agerpres, 2024), *Timiș: Maia Sandu Visited Exhibition “Brâncuși: Romanian Sources and Universal Perspectives”, at MNArT* (Agerpres, 2024), *Maia Sandu - First Laureate of "Timișoara for European Values" Award* (Agerpres, 2024), *President of the Republic of Moldova - Received by Royal Family at Săvârșin Castle* (Agerpres, 2024), *Republic of Moldova: Maia Sandu Encourages Moldovans to Enroll in Free Courses Offered by National Program for Studying Romanian Language* (Agerpres, 2024), *Republic of Moldova: President Maia Sandu Welcomes US Sanctions Against Marina Tauber, Member of Pro-Russian Shor Party* (Agerpres, 2024), *Maia Sandu: Russia Has Intensified Its Actions to Destabilize the Republic of Moldova* (Agerpres, 2024), *Russian Elections 2024: Virulent Attack By Head of Central Electoral Commission of Russia Against Maia Sandu* (Agerpres, 2024), etc.

And, on the contrary, the high degree of their use in RIA Novosti news indicates that the respective institution focuses its activity not so much on reflecting reality in our country as on projecting a negative image of President Sandu. The headlines below expressly show that the efforts of RIA Novosti journalists are aimed specifically in this direction: *An Expert Believes That Sandu Is Preparing Moldova for War* (RIA Novosti, 2024), *Former Leader of Gagauzia Says That Sandu Is Organizing “Political Inquisition”* (RIA Novosti, 2024), *Moldovan Opposition Urged Mayors to “Not Submit to Sandu’s Blackmail”* (RIA Novosti, 2024), *Sandu Believes That Russia Will Try to Destabilize Situation in Moldova* (RIA Novosti, 2024), *Sandu Wants to Be Re-Elected to Break Ties With the CIS* (RIA Novosti, 2024), *Militarism and Dictatorship Have Become Ideology of Moldovan President, Claims an Expert* (RIA Novosti, 2024), *Moldovan Opposition Accuses Sandu of Establishing Dictatorship* (RIA Novosti, 2024), *Dodon Says That Sandu Is Deliberately Hindering Presidential Elections in Russia* (RIA Novosti, 2024), *In Moldova, an Opposition MP Accused Sandu of Usurping Power* (RIA Novosti, 2024), *Renaissance Party Urges Unity Against Sandu’s Re-Election* (RIA Novosti, 2024), etc.

During the period under monitoring, journalists from Agerpres used only two of the four previously mentioned techniques, namely: the “Repetition of Information” technique used four times, and the “Affirmation” technique used only once, while those from RIA Novosti used them all. The analysis shows that in RIA Novosti news, the “Affirmation” technique was used most frequently – 19 times, followed by the “Blatant Lie” technique, used 10 times. With an insignificant gap, the “Indication of Enemy” technique used 8 times was in third place, and the “Repetition of Information” technique was in last place. These data allow us to state that the Agerpres agency approached the Moldovan reality in a more balanced way, with journalistic efforts being oriented towards presenting the facts or political events themselves, while RIA Novosti, on the contrary, reflected the socio-political and economic

life of the Republic of Moldova in an unbalanced way, only from a negative perspective, resorting to tactics of manipulation and influencing the perception of readers. It is thus evident that *Agerpres* used these techniques to reiterate the positive aspects of the activity of the President of the Republic of Moldova and, respectively, to create a positive image of her, and *RIA Novosti*, on the contrary, used them to emphasise the negative aspects of her activity and to project a hostile image of her. This clearly demonstrates, and once again confirms, the idea stated earlier – that the way in which the state media of another country approaches the reality of one country depends on the existing relations between these two countries.

The media purposefully constructs the image of a social/political subject, adjusting or reshaping it through interpretive accents and the media contexts in which they place their activities, actions, and statements. “An essential component in the image-building process is the position that the media adopts towards a particular political actor. When the public opts for a media channel with a specific social orientation, it is already predisposed to accept the proposed perspective regarding the political leader. The institutional authority of the media can exert a significant influence on the degree of trust given to the information disseminated” (Kurmanina, 2016).

The last analysis criterion aimed to clarify the types of images used by *Agerpres* and *RIA Novosti* in content about President Maia Sandu's activities. From the perspective of that criterion, the activity of these two agencies does not differ significantly, as both used archive photographs as a priority to reflect the reality in the Republic of Moldova and the activity of the country's president (see table no. 4).

Tabelul 4. Types of Images Used in Journalistic Materials About the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, Circulated by *Agerpres* and *RIA Novosti*

Types of Images	Photo	Image-Symbol	Graphic Image	Without Image
Media Institution				
Agerpres	12	2	0	1
%	80%	13.33%		6.67
RIA Novosti	29	1	0	0
%	97.67%	3.33%	0%	0%

Source: Elaborated by the author

The research demonstrated that, to amplify the textual message, the agencies make full use of iconography. Thus, during the mentioned period, *RIA Novosti* exclusively broadcast content accompanied by iconographic images, and *Agerpres* used iconography in 14 news items (one appeared only in text format), which constitutes 93.33% of the total news items produced by this institution.

The analysis highlighted both agencies' preference for archival photographs, whether they are portraits of Maia Sandu or of the people whose statements are in the material, whether they are photographs taken at the event being reported, or whether they are archival photographs taken during past events. *Agerpres* used photographs in 12 materials, which constitutes 80% of the total number of news items produced, and *RIA Novosti* used photographs in 29 materials, which constitute 97% of the total number of news items broadcast.

Although much less frequently, the agencies also used symbolic images. In the case of *Agerpres*, the share of news stories in which symbolic images were used is 13.33% of the total analysed materials, and in the case of RIA Novosti, it is 1% of the total analysed materials.

At the same time, the analysis showed that neither of the two monitored agencies used diagrams, graphs, or other visual representations in their materials. The journalists, therefore, opted for simpler images that would strictly reflect the theme of the material or the protagonist's face, but would not contribute to a better understanding of the subject.

Conclusions

In this research, the analysis of the way of reflecting the Moldovan reality and projecting the image of the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, in the mass media in the West and the East, carried out within the framework of this study, allows us to find the following:

Media institutions, especially official or state-owned ones, reflect external reality in line with the strategic objectives of the country's official policy, demonstrating that this category of the press develops its media agenda and organises its activities through the prism of the country's political and economic interests or those of its leadership.

The *Agerpres* agency from Romania - a country with which the Republic of Moldova has friendly relations, reflected the reality of the Republic of Moldova and the activity of President Maia Sandu, more or less, balanced. Events were approached from a positive-neutral perspective, with information on the subject placed in either positive or neutral contexts. In most cases, *Agerpres* used, in its materials, techniques for shaping the image of the political leader that favoured Maia Sandu and strengthened her positive image internationally.

The *RIA Novosti* Agency from the Russian Federation – a state with which the Republic of Moldova has increasingly tense relations - reflected the reality in the Republic of Moldova and the activity of President Maia Sandu in a biased, subjective, unbalanced, and unilateral manner. Russian journalists placed the information in predominantly negative contexts and used traditional techniques for shaping the image of the political leader to criticise and discredit the head of state's activities, thereby distorting people's perceptions and deforming her image.

The activity of a head of state is reflected in the mass media of another country, as a rule, through the prism of the existing relations between these two states. The closer and friendlier the ties between two countries are, the more favourably the image of one country's president is projected in the mass media of the other, oscillating between positive and neutral representations. Conversely, the more rigid and tense the ties between two countries are, the more negative the representation of the president of one country in the media of the other, and the more distorted his/her image is as projected by the media in question.

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