

ANALYTICAL REPORT

Community WatchDog.MD

The image of international actors in Moldovan TV news

Reference period
December 2022- February 2023

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Liability Waiver

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The report was produced at the request of the WatchDog.md Community based on data provided by the project team. Responsibility for the content of the document and interpretation of the data lies on the author. Responsibility for the accuracy of the data provided for this report lies entirely on the WatchDog.md team.

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Introduction

The WatchDog.MD Community launched an initiative in 2022 to monitor the coverage of international issues in TV news in Moldova. The effort is supported by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) under the project “Strengthening the quality and information capacity of independent media”. This report presents the main trends identified at the national level as a result of monitoring the TV media space between December 2022 and February 2023, and provides a brief analysis and contextualization of the findings identified. The material is the second in a series of studies in the pipeline. Previously, in February 2023, the first study entitled Reflection of the main geopolitical actors in Moldovan TV news in November 2022 was presented¹.

The aim of this report is to understand how public opinion is structured and shaped in relation to international political leaders and foreign states. One of the main objectives is to measure the influence of domestic TV news in shaping public perception and geopolitical preferences of Moldovan citizens.

To address this objective, the WatchDog.MD team tracks what people see in the daily TV news bulletins about international players; estimates and determines the impact of the news based on the popularity of selected TV stations; and assesses the context in which different TV stations present and mention the most important world leaders and the countries they lead. Subsumed, these three directions contribute to understanding the image created by television on foreign countries through the most watched TV channels in the Republic of Moldova.

The project is not the first of its kind in the Community's portfolio, but represents a continuation of the direction launched in 2018 with the study "The content of television information space in the Republic of Moldova and how it shapes electoral behaviour"². The main conclusion drawn from the study was that the Russian Federation dominates the information space in terms of foreign policy news, and therefore this fact influences the degree of increased trust in Vladimir Putin, which at that time was over 60% of respondents in the Republic of Moldova.

The need for such a study

One of the arguments generally accepted and supported by numerous research findings is that the media, in all its forms, has a powerful impact on everyday life. In particular, the media is influential in shaping beliefs and perceptions about our own and outside worlds. For example, Marco Dohle and Uli Bernhard of the Department of Communication and Media Studies,

¹ The study can be accessed at: <https://www.watchdog.md/2023/02/28/raport-reflectarea-principaliilor-actori-geopolitici-in-stirile-tv-din-republica-moldova-in-luna-noiembrie-2022/>

² The material is available at: https://watchdog.md/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Studiu-WATCHDOG_propaganda-rusa-la-TV-

Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf, based on existing international studies, note the influence of the media on attitudes, political opinions and voting behaviour in the digital age³. However, it should be noted that media influence is shaped by several factors, such as: emotion provoked by news content (socially desirable/undesirable), type of culture (individualistic/collectivistic), level of education, perceptions of in-group and out-group. As sociologist Septimiu Chelcea points out⁴, as a rule we tend to consider the members of the group as similar to us and the members of other groups as different from us, which influences our credibility on media sources. In other words, it is natural that a person who identifies with the Russian civilizational space should have a more favourable perception of the states that he or she considers to be part of this space and be more sceptical of everything that comes from outside it. Just as a person with liberal values will seek to identify with states that in their perception are democratic.

These findings are especially relevant in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine when the role of the media in covering international events has become crucial in understanding the foreign policy objectives of international actors. Given the fact that the information space in Moldova has been dominated by Russian-language media, news and TV broadcasts from the Russian Federation, the way foreign political leaders, from Vladimir Putin to Joe Biden, are currently presented, as well as the way their actions and the countries they lead are emphasized, can be decisive in influencing the geopolitical preferences of the country's citizens. In turn, people's foreign policy preferences influence their domestic ones, as at the national level, each of the main political parties in Moldova has an external vector. Thus, the need to monitor the national media is a decisive step in the complex process of understanding and explaining the social and political dynamics in Moldova.

Methodology

The working approach established within the project is based on the results of the Public Opinion Barometer (BOP) of November 2022⁵ conducted by the Centre for Social and Marketing Studies "CBS-Research" on behalf of the Institute for Public Policy. On the basis of the BOP data: the main sources of public information were determined according to the degree of trust declared in the survey; the main subjects monitored were selected; a weighted estimate of the impact of each TV channel chosen to be monitored was made according to its popularity as revealed by the survey.

Therefore, it was found necessary to monitor the news bulletins of eight out of all the TV channels that the respondents mentioned as among the three TV channels from which they get their news most often.

³ See Dohle, Marco, Bernhard, Uli (2016). *Third-person effect and influence of presumed media influence approach revisited*, in Vowe, Henn (eds.). *The Evolution Political Communication in the Online World. Theoretical Approaches and Research Designs*. (pp. 103-117). New York, Routledge.

⁴ Chelcea, Septimiu (2006). *Opinia publica. Strategii de persuasiune si manipulare*. Editura Economica.

⁵ The survey is available here: <https://ipp.md/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Sondajul-BOP-noiembrie-2022.pdf>

These stations are: *Jurnal TV, Moldova 1, Pro TV Chişinău, Prime TV, TV8, NTV Moldova, First in Moldova and RTR Moldova*. From October 2022, the content of prime-time bulletins (18:00-23:00) broadcast on Sundays to Thursdays has been systematised. For each TV station one news bulletin per day is analysed. Sunday was selected for monitoring instead of Friday and Saturday because a decrease in external news was observed on these days. In addition, summary news bulletins are broadcast on Sundays, covering the most important events of the past week.

The following subjects have been selected for monitoring in the news bulletins: **Ukraine** and Volodymyr (Volodimir) **Zelenski**, **Russian Federation** and Vladimir **Putin**, **Belarus** and Aleksandr **Lukashenko**, **United States of America** and Joe **Biden**, **Romania** and Klaus **Iohannis**, **France** and Emmanuel **Macron**, **Germany** and Olaf **Scholz**, **United Kingdom**, and Liz Truss/Rishi **Sunak**, **Turkey** and Recep Tayyip **Erdogan**, **China** and Xi **Jinping**, and **Czech Republic** and **Lithuania**.

Also monitored are the supranational entities **European Union (EU)** and European Commission President Ursula von **der Leyen**, the **North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO)** and the **Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)**. The monitoring includes 12 countries, 4 international entities and 11 foreign leaders from Europe, North America and Asia.

Each of the monitored topics is assigned one point for each news item in which it is mentioned. If different subjects are mentioned in the same news item, each will receive one point in turn.

At the same time, each news item is evaluated by the monitors by assigning positive, negative or neutral indicators. Depending on the way the news is written, edited, presented, depending on the emphasis and theme of the news, it may present the subject of the monitoring in a positive, negative or neutral light. The attribution of indicators can therefore be interpreted depending on how the news is expected to be perceived by the general public.

Systematization and interpretation of the scores obtained from monitoring the news from a given time period is carried out through the process of correlating the data with the results provided by the BOP November 2022 survey and the monthly surveys conducted by the WatchDog.MD Community or other credible organizations from the project team's perspective. For the selected reference period in this report (December 2022 - February 2023) the data will be correlated with the January 2023⁶ and February-March 2023⁷ Socio-Political Survey conducted by the Center for Social Studies and Marketing "CBS-Research" for the WatchDog.MD Community and reported comparatively to the Public Opinion Barometer in 2022 and 2021.

⁶ See survey details here: <https://www.watchdog.md/2023/02/03/comunitatea-watchdog-md-a-prezentat-rezultatele-unui-sondaj-de-opinie/>

⁷ And here: <https://www.watchdog.md/2023/03/09/watchdog-md-community-presented-the-results-of-the-second-opinion-poll/>

As of December 2022, the working methodology **underwent changes** due to the suspension of broadcasting licenses of some audiovisual media services during the state of emergency declared in the Republic of Moldova in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine. These include *First in Moldova, RTR Moldova, NTV Moldova*, which are the subject of monitoring in this project⁸. As a result, as of 16 December 2022, the monitoring of the media content of only five TV stations out of the eight initially selected was continued without the three whose licenses were suspended. Thus, any reference in this study to the channels *First in Moldova, RTR Moldova, NTV Moldova* reflects a partial assessment referring to the first half of December 2022 (4-15 December 2022).

Given the change in methodology, this report will not include weightings that reflect the estimated impact of the identified mentions per monitored TV channel on the population. However, it is necessary to reiterate that, as found in the previous report, *Jurnal TV, Pro TV, Moldova 1 and Prime TV* are the most frequently mentioned channels among TV users' preferences (see chart 1). These channels would therefore have a considerably greater impact in shaping public opinion than the three whose licences have been suspended. We estimate that for the months December 2022 - February 2023 the predominance and importance of the 5 constantly monitored channels is maintained, whose impact we estimate to have slightly increased in the context of the narrowing of options in the domestic media space. However, given the different target group of the 8 TV channels, it is erroneous to anticipate that the users of the channels whose license has been suspended have fully reoriented to the 5 monitored in this report. Therefore, interpreting the impact of the representation of the monitored subjects by the targeted channels should be done with caution, as it gives us only a part of the complete picture of the audiovisual space in the Republic of Moldova.

⁸ See Provision No 54 of 16 December 2022 issued by the Commission for Exceptional Situations of the Republic of Moldova:
https://gov.md/sites/default/files/document/attachments/dispozitia_cse_a_rm_nr.54_din_16.12.2022_r_0.pdf

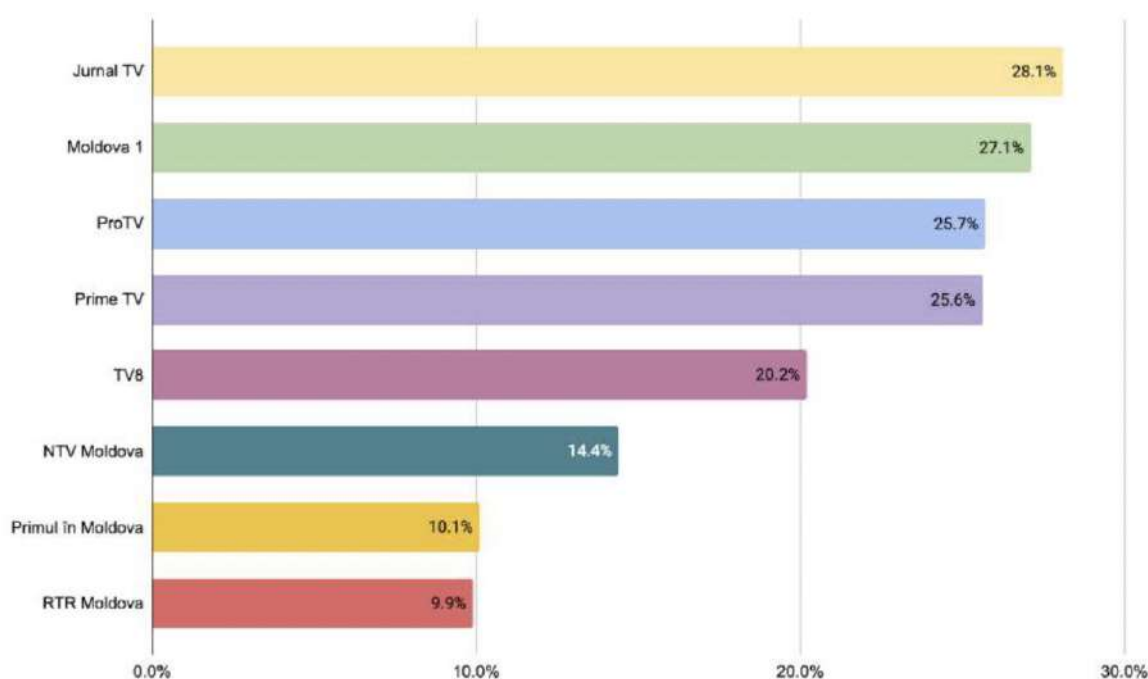


Chart No. 1. Estimated impact of each TV channel according to the weight calculation for the percentage of respondents who indicated that TV channel as one of the three from which they get information most often (according to BOP 2022). If a TV has a 40% share, it means that it is an important source of information for 40% of citizens.

Structure of the Study

The report is structured in three sections. The first section provides an overview of the audiovisual space in the Republic of Moldova, reinforcing the argument for the importance of monitoring TV stations at national level. The second section presents a brief summary of the most important findings from the WatchDog.MD Community report launched in February 2023. The study continues with the presentation of data and the main trends in the portrayal of monitored subjects identified on selected TV channels during the period under review. The section is structured into predominant themes: western actors, Ukraine, Russia, China and Turkey. It also argumentatively presents some ideas aimed at suggesting the possible discrepancy between the results of TV media monitoring and the perception of the population as measured in recent surveys conducted by the WatchDog.MD Community.

Finally, the third section provides the most relevant conclusions of the study from the analysis of data from the reference period.

General findings on the audiovisual space in the Republic of Moldova

In the Republic of Moldova, television remains one of the most important sources of information on both domestic and foreign news. It is slightly overtaken by the internet with social media, which in recent years has almost tripled its daily accesses among respondents

from 24% in 2010 to 73.8% in 2022 (BOP 2021 appendix⁹ and BOP November 2022¹⁰). However, despite forecasts of TV being overtaken by the internet, TV has never dropped below the 50% threshold in daily accesses by respondents, reaching its highest score between 2008-2015 at around 87% and currently reaching around 63.6% (BOP November 2022).

According to the November 2022 BOP, the internet slightly overtakes television as the main source of information accounting for 45% compared to television which is the primary source of information for 41% of respondents. However, the combined figures for the primary and secondary sources of information indicate that television outperforms the internet. Moreover, television is gaining ground when it comes to providing information about the country and abroad being preferred by 55.8% of respondents over information websites accessed by 35% and social networks - 39.7% respondents.

It should be noted that Russian or Russian-language TV and radio are still the primary source of information for 19.9% of respondents, while Romanian and Romanian-language TV and radio are watched by 16.1%.

However, television is losing out in terms of the degree of trust shown by respondents. Thus, 31.8% of respondents said that the internet is a more reliable source of information and only 24.5% consider this about television. However, the local audiovisual media still maintains a constant level of trust among the population, being considered a reliable source by slightly more than half of the citizens - 51.5%.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine and the government measures taken to regulate the domestic media space have led to a considerable change in the population's preference of information sources.

Almost two years after the penultimate measurement of respondents' trust in the media in the Republic of Moldova (BOP February 2021), we observe a significant decrease in consumer attitudes towards Russian or Russian-language media. Respectively in 2021, 42.9% of respondents showed trust or some trust in Russian or Russian language media sources. In 2022, only 23.3% of respondents still consider these sources to be trustworthy (BOP November 2022). In contrast, the degree of trust in Ukrainian, Romanian and EU media sources remains relatively constant with slight positive swings.

It is also remarkable that the TV channels whose licence was suspended in December 2022 have fallen from the top of the preferred sources of information since November 2022. However, the Prime channel has lost most of its notoriety, rated in 2021 as the first among the three most favorite TV channels, from 44% in 2021 to 10.1% in 2022, followed by RTR Moldova from 22.6% to 9.9% and NTV from 20.5% to 14.4%. The chart below shows how

⁹ The BOP Annex can be accessed here: https://ipp.md/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/BOP_02.2021_anexa.pdf

¹⁰ The survey can be found here: <https://ipp.md/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Sondajul-BOP-noiembrie-2022.pdf>

respondents' preferences towards 8 TV channels varied from 2021 to 2022 according to the Public Policy Institute opinion barometer data.

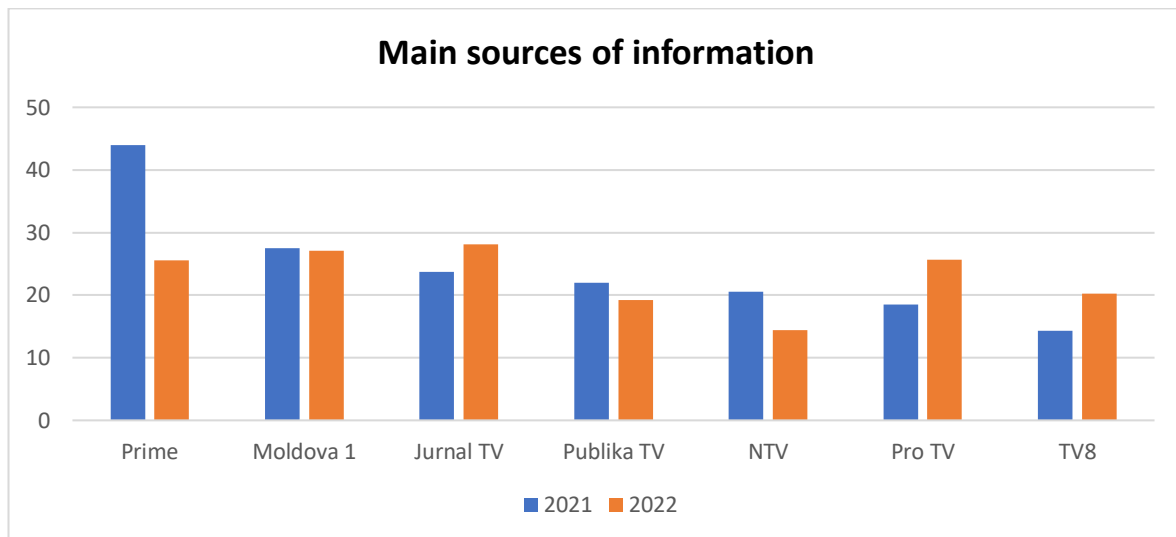


Chart no.2. TV channels that were rated as most important as a result of respondents' frequency of use according to BOP 2021 and BOP 2022.

It is worth noting that while channels such as *Prime* or *Moldova 1* are relatively equivalent in the distribution of preferences by nationality and/or language, *NTV* and *RTR* are among the favourites of citizens who identify with other ethnic groups and/or Russian speakers. *Jurnal TV*, *Pro TV* and *TV8* are more frequently mentioned as the main sources of information for citizens who identify themselves as Romanian speakers.

Monitoring findings for the period October to November 2022

According to WatchDog.MD Community estimates, among the eight TV stations monitored in October - November 2022, *Jurnal TV*, *Pro TV* and *TV8* had the highest impact, covering 56.8%¹¹ of the media space. In comparison, the group of TV channels *RTR Moldova*, *First in Moldova*, *NTV* and *Moldova1* had a share of 19.2%, reflecting their impact in the local audiovisual space.

These TV channels (*RTR Moldova*, *First in Moldova* and *NTV Moldova*) were also the ones that most frequently reflected in a negative light Western actors (US, EU, NATO) and Ukraine. These, for example, were the only TV channels that placed the European Union and Ursula von der Leyen in a negative context, and the negative mentions of Ukraine and Volodymyr Zelensky in the news of these channels far outweighed the positive ones.

On the other hand, Russia and Vladimir Putin were mentioned in a positive context on *First in Moldova* and *RTR Moldova* in 20% of cases, and on *NTV Moldova* in 5% of cases.

¹¹ The report can be found here: <https://www.watchdog.md/2023/02/28/raport-reflectarea-principalilor-actori-geopolitici-in-stirile-tv-din-republica-moldova-in-luna-noiembrie-2022/>

Overall, the Russian Federation was given the highest share of monitored TV news on the eight TV channels, with the Russian Federation being covered in a negative context in most cases. This was followed by news about Ukraine and the European Union.

The previous study found that the number and impact of negative news about Russia and Vladimir Putin was significantly higher:

- than positive or neutral mentions;
- compared to any other country and leader monitored.

Findings and trends of monitored TV channels from December 2022 to February 2023

During the prime-time news monitoring period (04.12.2022 - 23.02.2023), the selected subjects reached a total of **5879 mentions**. Most often the subjects were covered in the news of *Pro TV* - 24.97% (1468 mentions) and *Jurnal TV* - 23.86% (1403 mentions). The stations whose license was suspended had in the two weeks of broadcasting in December 2022 cumulated 9.24% of mentions, respectively 4.98% (293 mentions of subjects) went to *RTR*, 2.87% (169 mentions) to *First in Moldova* and 1.38% (81 mentions) to *NTV* (see Chart 3).

However, it should be noted that, when referring to the period during which the three stations with suspended licenses broadcast foreign policy news (4-15 December 2022), their percentage was 37.8% compared to the other five stations monitored during the same period. The most news items targeting the monitored subjects during the period were broadcast by *RTR TV* channel which had a share of 20.40% of the total mentions, surpassing *Jurnal TV* and *ProTV*. We can thus estimate that, in the absence of the suspension of the broadcasting licence, *RTR* would have been the TV source providing the most news about international actors, although overall it has a lower popularity among viewers.

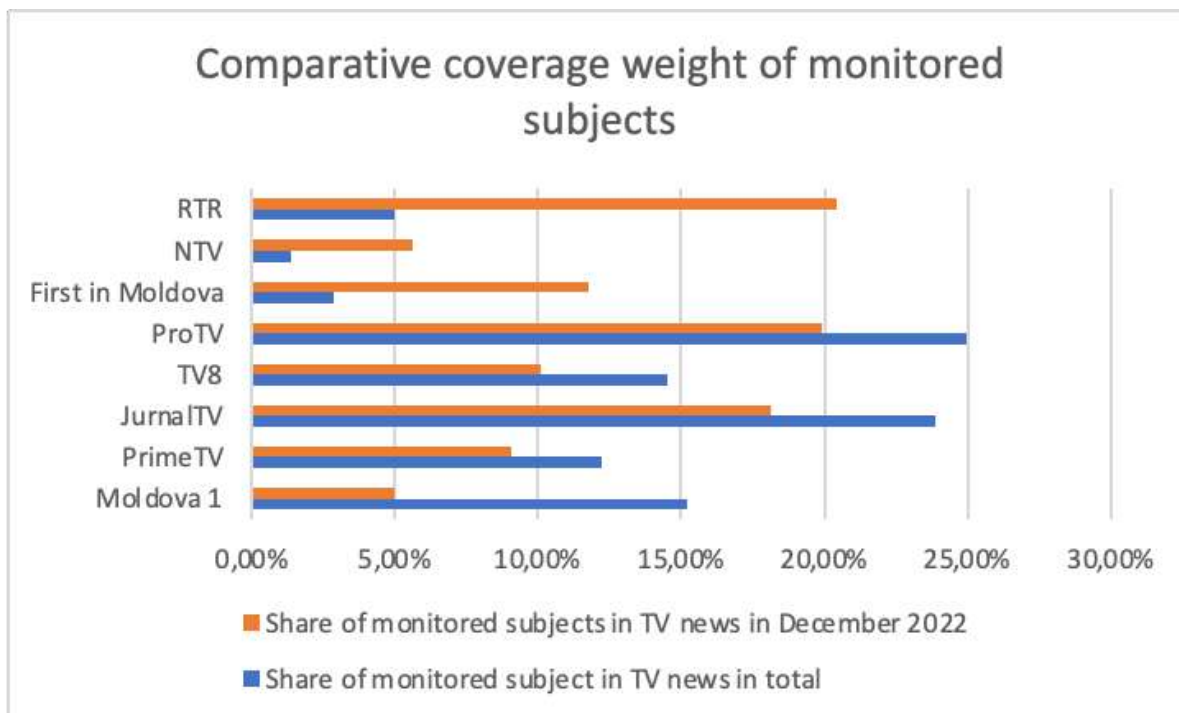


Chart No.3. Comparative percentage of news broadcasting targeting the monitored subjects on selected TV channels in December 2022 and December 2022-February 2023 respectively.

Most mentions of the 5879 identified were attributed to Western leaders and states, including the EU and NATO. These subjects in total were mentioned 2635 times (44.82%) (see chart no.4). Nearly half of these mentions in relation to Western states, leaders and political entities were rated as neutral - 1296 mentions and about as many positive -1202 mentions. The assessment of the subjects as being covered in a neutral light does not necessarily mean that the TV stations were even-handed and chose to present the news in this way, but may also suggest that often these actors were mentioned adjacent to topical issues without forming the key content of the news, as can be seen from the analysis of the monitored media content.

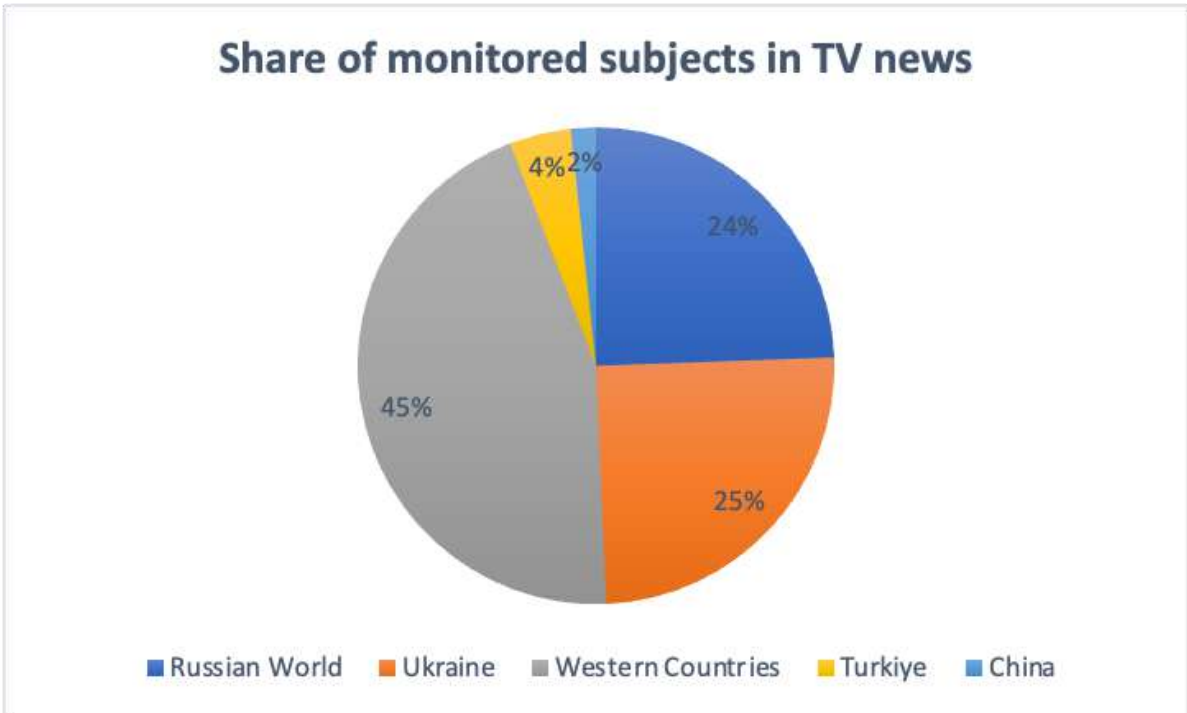


Chart no.4. Percentage of international actors grouped in 5 predominant categories in TV news content.

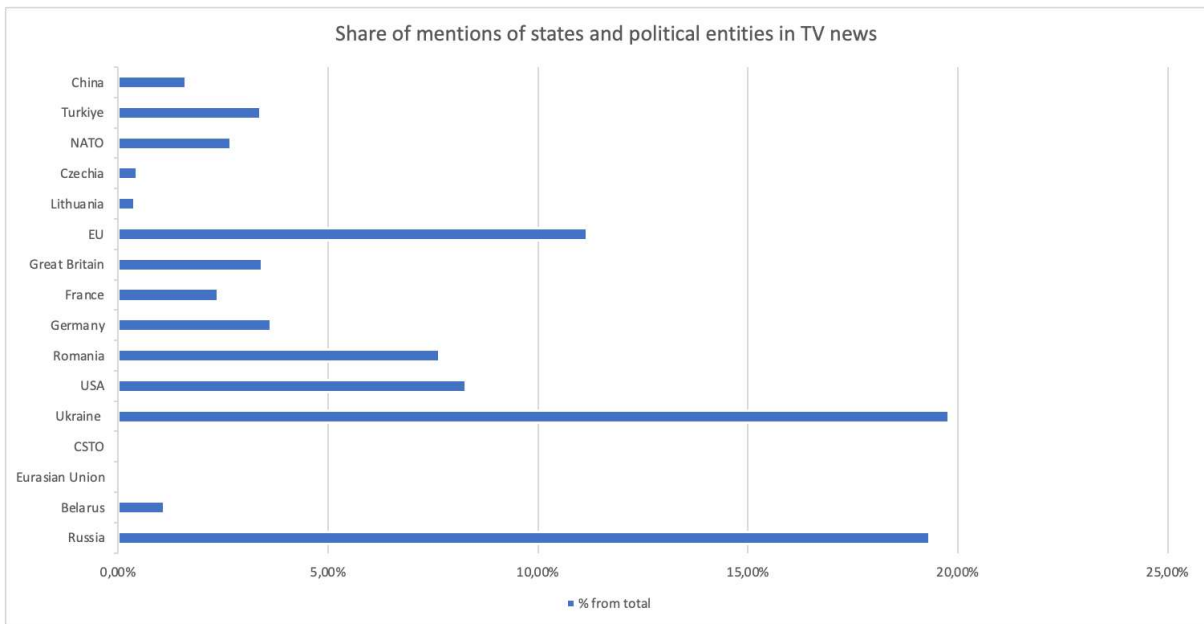


Chart no.5. Percentage of mentions of states and political entities in TV news.

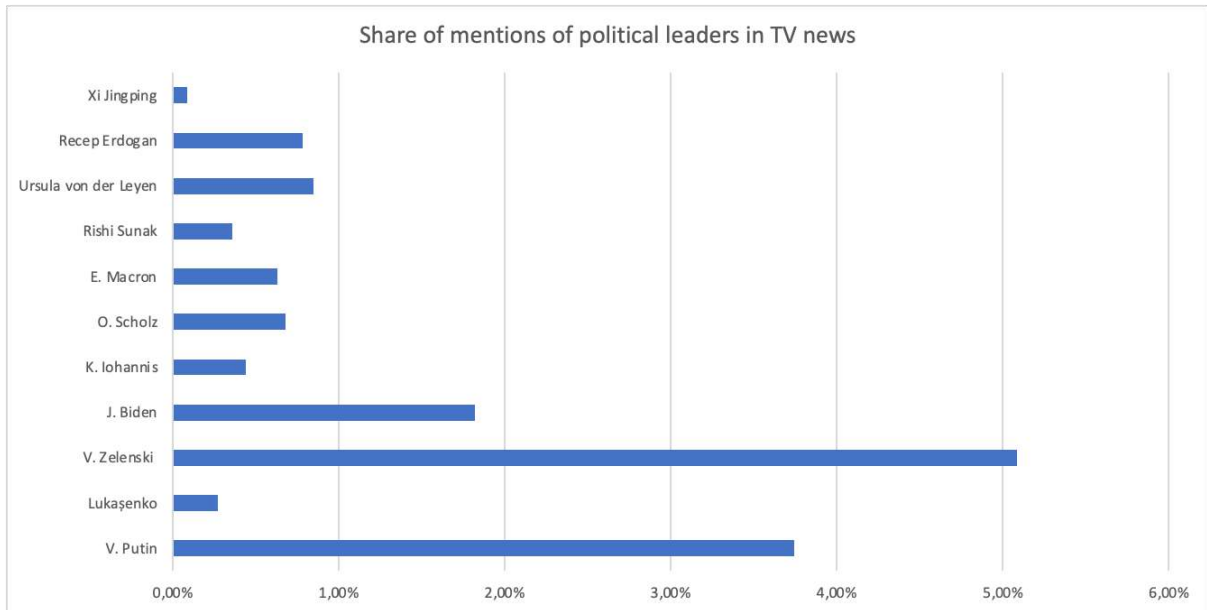


Chart no.6. Percentage of mentions of political leaders in TV news.

After the group of Western states, leaders and supranational entities, Ukraine and President Zelensky prevailed with 1462 mentions, 802 of which were rated as positive. At a close second, Russia and Vladimir Putin accumulated 1356 mentions, maintaining the trend of reflecting news about Russia in a negative light as in previous months - 994 negative mentions.

The novelty of the monitored period is the prevalence of negatively rated news in the coverage of Turkey. Although this country received much less attention than other subjects, accumulating a total of 199 mentions, 88 of them were rated as having negative content. This correlates with the natural disasters that occurred in Turkey in the first months of 2023 which were rated as having a negative emotional impact on news consumers.

The data obtained suggest that TV channels contributed to a large extent to the negative image of the Russian Federation and to a lesser but still significant extent to the negative image of Turkey and Belarus (see chart no.7). Regarding political leaders, we find that the TV media presented the Russian president predominantly negatively and Belarus to a lesser extent (see chart no.8).

At the other end of the spectrum, the European Union and Ukraine received the most positive TV coverage, and Romania and the USA to a moderate extent.

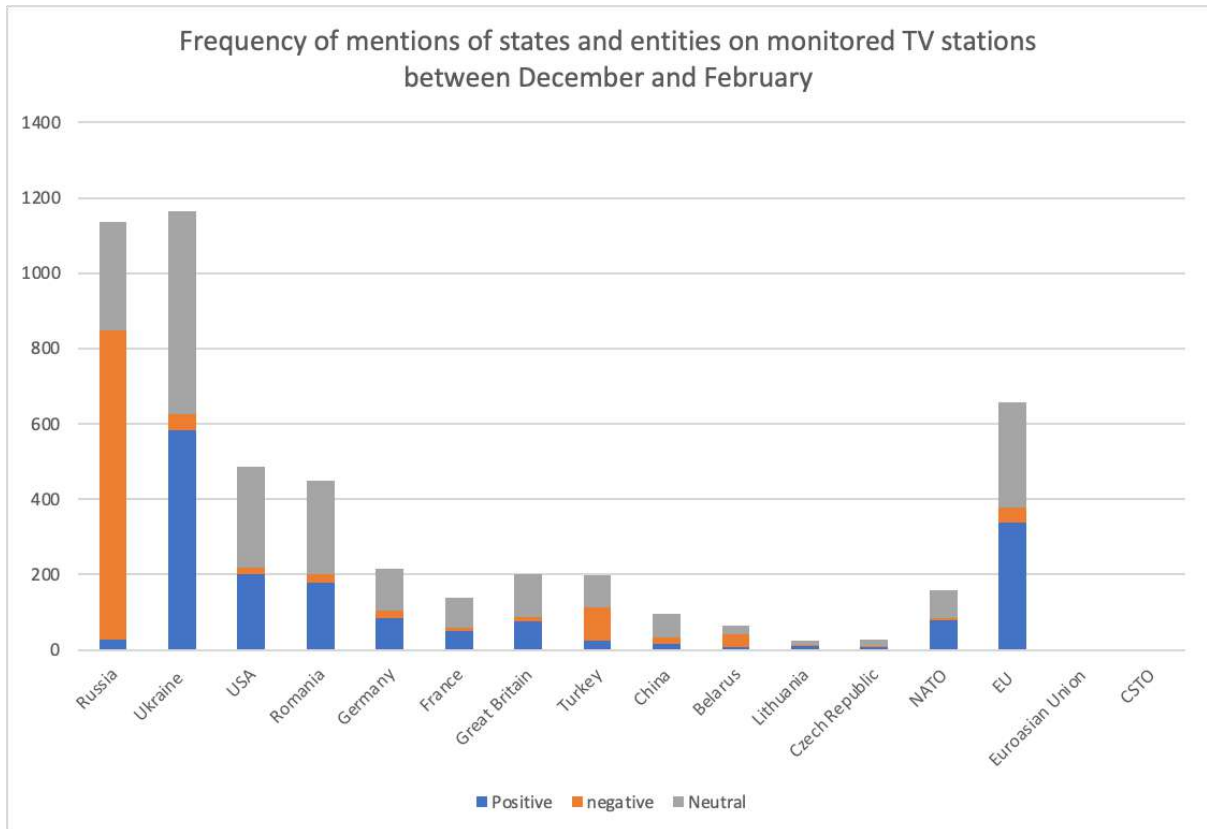


Chart no.7. Positive, negative and neutral representation of monitored subjects - States and political entities.

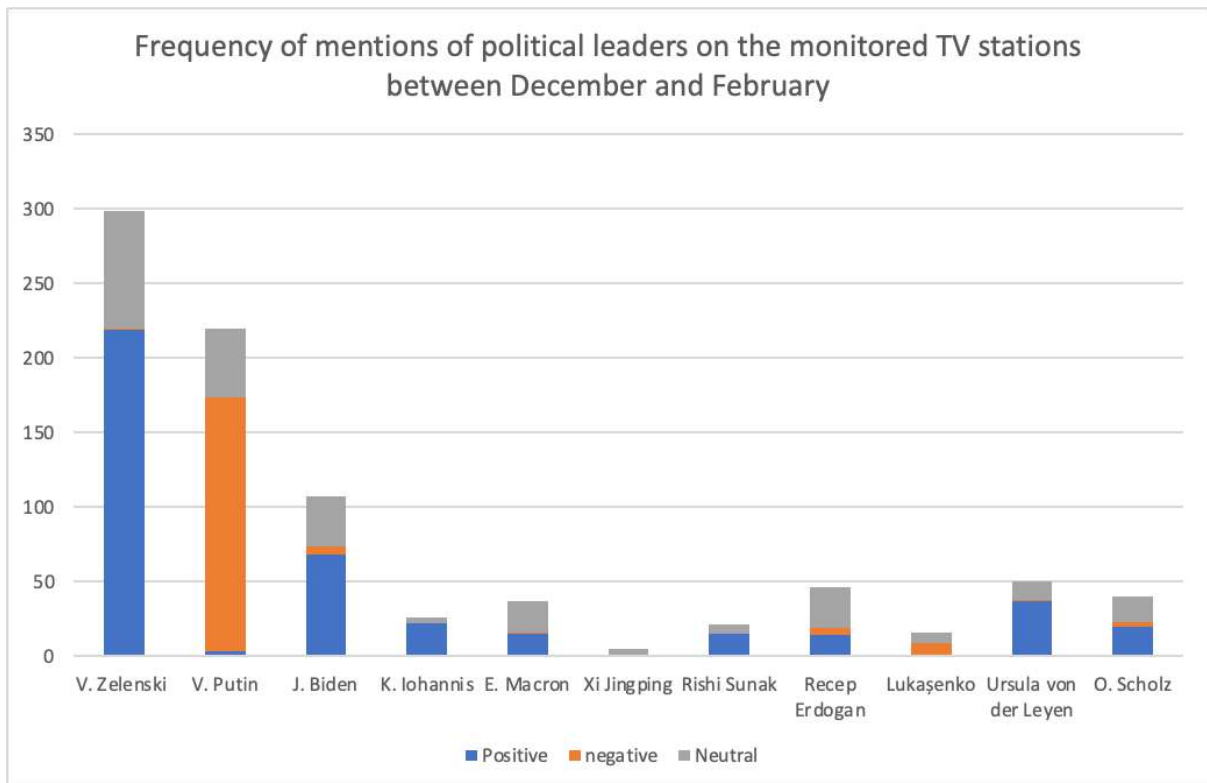


Chart no.8. Positive, negative and neutral representation of monitored subjects - Political leaders.

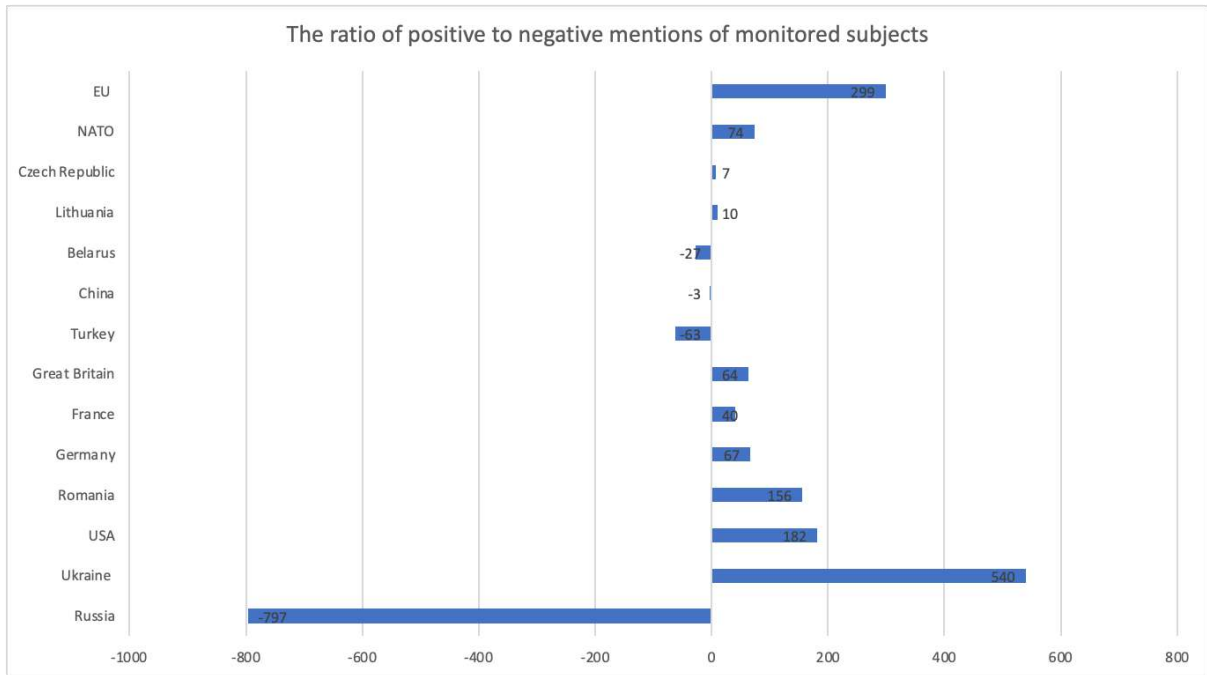


Chart no.9. Ratio between positive and negative mentions of states and political entities.

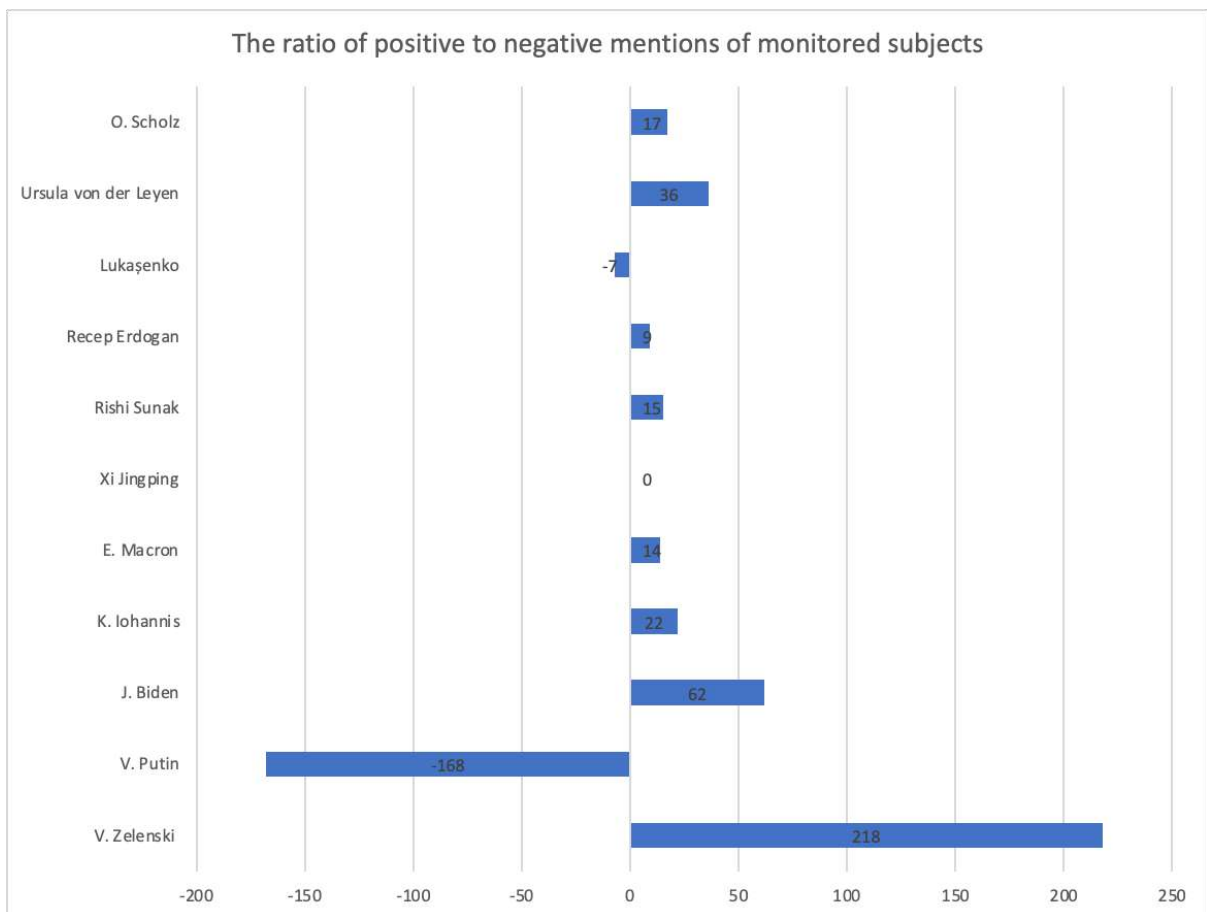


Chart no.10. Ratio of positive and negative mentions of political leaders.

Group of Western states, leaders, and supra-state entities in TV news

The European Union is the leader in foreign news appearances in the group of Western entities, reaching 656 mentions (11.16%) in the three months. Moreover, positive assessments of the EU prevail compared to all other Western subjects monitored, which were predominantly covered in a neutral light, then in a positive light and very little in a negative light.

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The EU accumulated 39 negative mentions, 33 of which were found in the first two weeks of December 2022 alone on TV channels *First in Moldova* - 18 mentions (11.16%), *RTR* -14 mentions and *NTV* -1 mention (see chart no. 9). Thus said, out of a total number of 113 negative EU mentions in a period of two weeks to, a quarter of them were identified on TV stations with suspended broadcasting license. Cumulatively these three channels had 918 mentions of Western subjects, 67 of which were negative. The figure represents almost half of all negative mentions - 113 mentions of the group of Western states, leaders and supra-state entities broadcast by all 8 TV stations monitored.

Subject	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total
USA	268	24	302	594
Romania*	200	22	254	476
Germany*	105	21	128	254
France*	65	11	100	176
United Kingdom*	91	12	119	222
UE	338	39	279	656
Ursula von der Leyen	37	1	12	50
Lithuania	11	1	11	23
Czech Republic	8	1	17	26
General UE	855	108	920	1883
NATO	79	5	74	158
General West	934	113	994	2041

Table 1. Total number of mentions for Western actors. States marked with * include mentions of monitored leaders

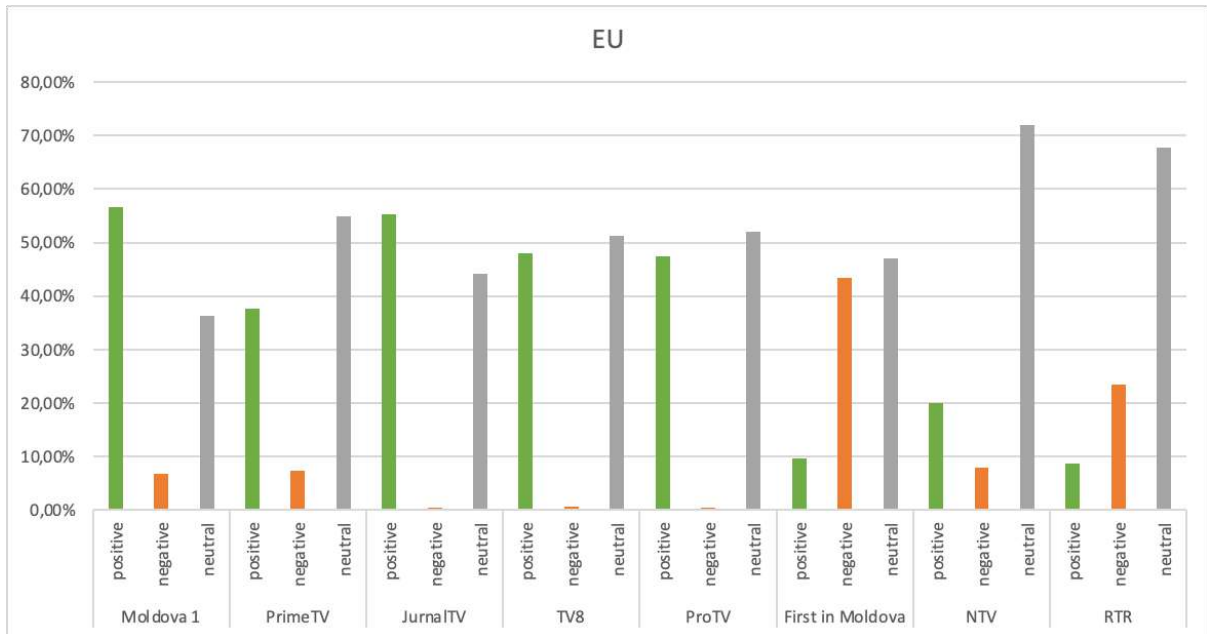


Chart no.11. EU image on TV channels for the period December 2022.

The US and President Biden dominated the number of mentions after the EU, accumulating a total of 594 points. Of these 24 were negative and 302 neutral. Apart from the three posts whose license was suspended, the remaining 5 posts gave predominantly neutral coverage to these subjects. The only difference is observed at Pro TV where there is a tie between neutral and positive mentions, 89 each, and at Jurnal TV which has more positive mentions - 71 than neutral - 47. The most negative reflections, in addition to the three stations with suspended licenses, were identified at Moldova 1, with 7 negative points.

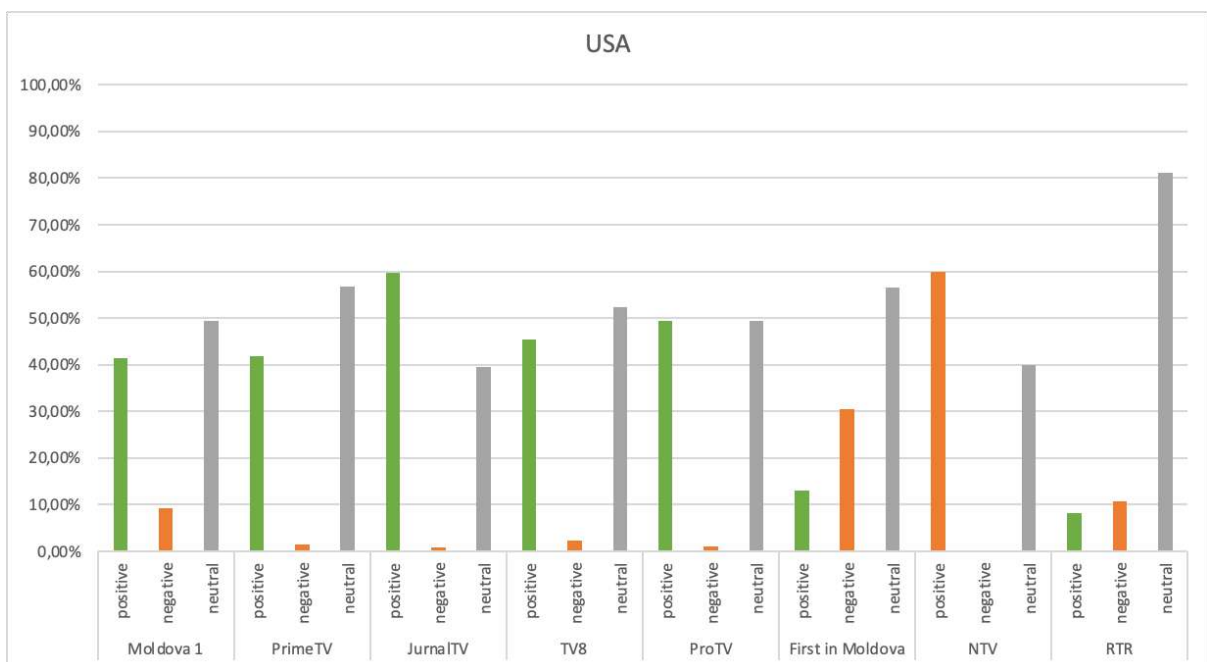


Chart no.12. The image of the US on TV channels for the period December 2022-February 2023.

Romania and President Iohannis were quite often the subjects of foreign news. They received 476 mentions, of which 22 were negative and 254 neutral. At the other end of the scale were Lithuania with 23 mentions in total and the Czech Republic with 26 mentions. The Czech Republic, for example, had more neutral than positive mentions.

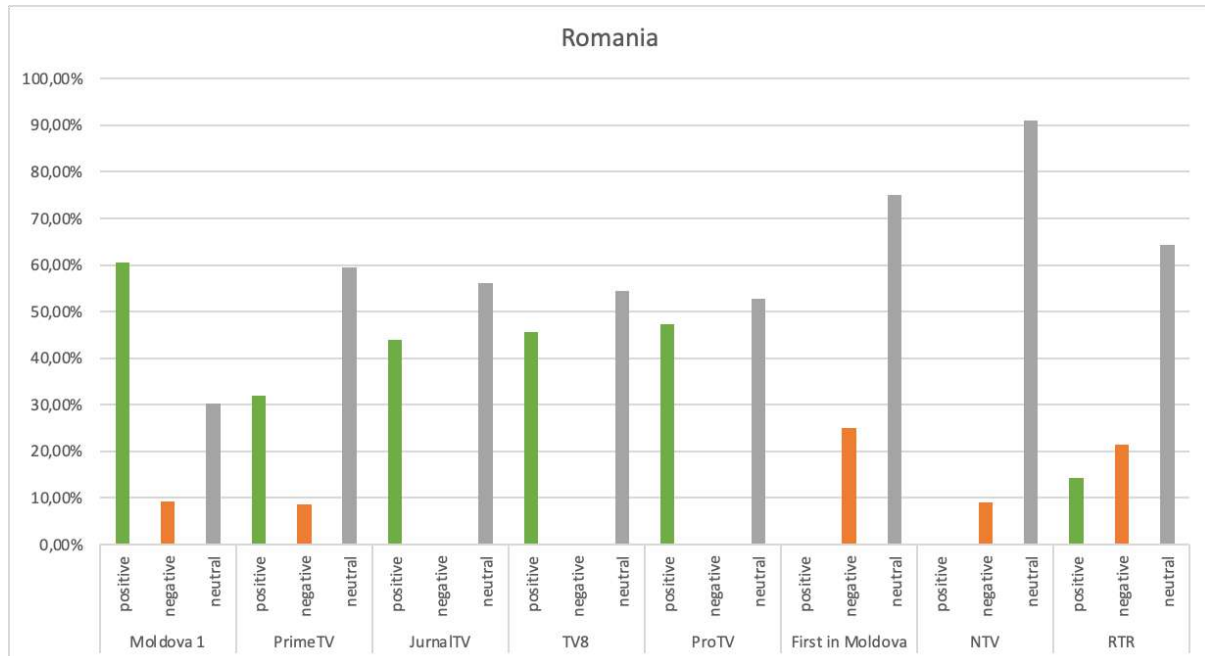


Chart no.13. Romania's image on TV channels for the period December 2022-February 2023.

However, Germany, France and the UK, together with their leaders, occupied a small space overall in international news, each accumulating between 176 and 254 points. See chart below. This suggests that at the national level interest in these players is still quite low, and Europe is still treated as an outside world, alien to Moldova.

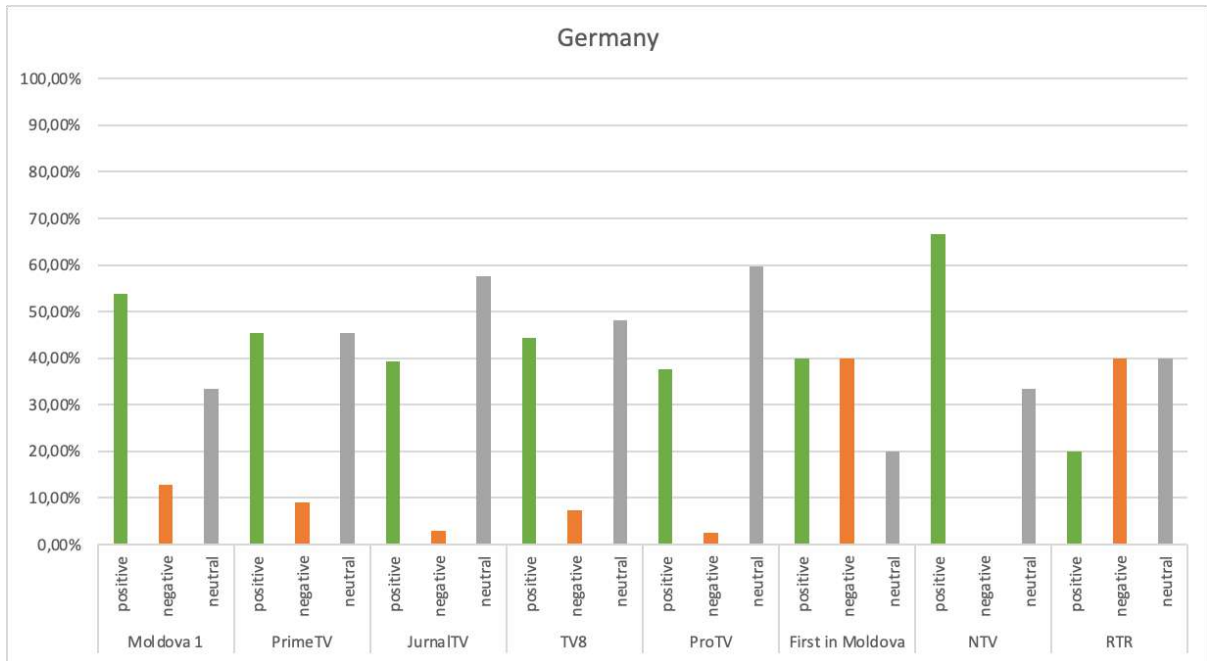


Chart no.14. The image of Germany on TV channels for the period December 2022-February 2023.

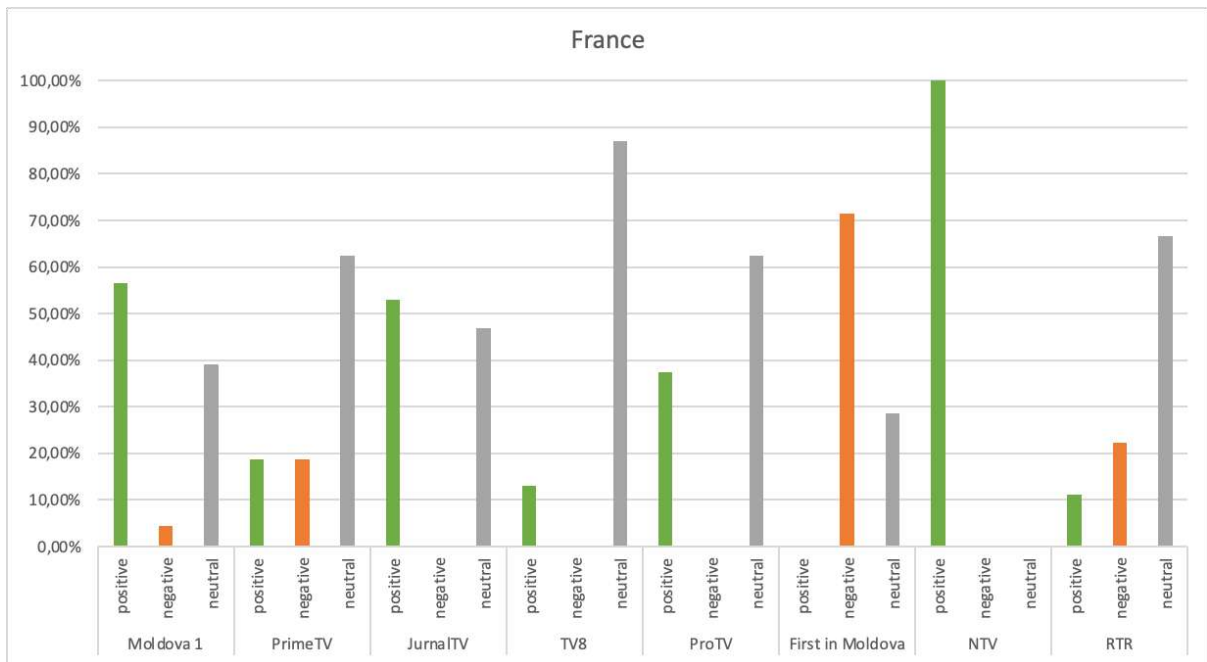


Chart no.15. France's image on TV channels for the period December 2022-February 2023.

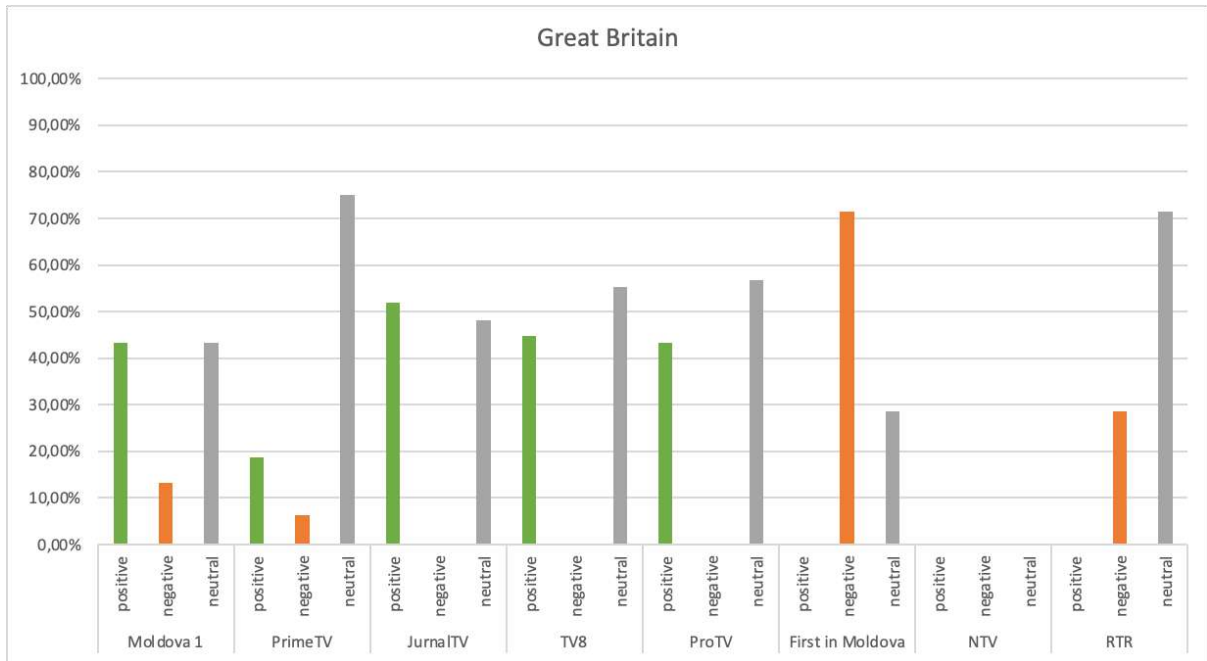


Chart no.16. UK TV picture for the period December 2022-February 2023.

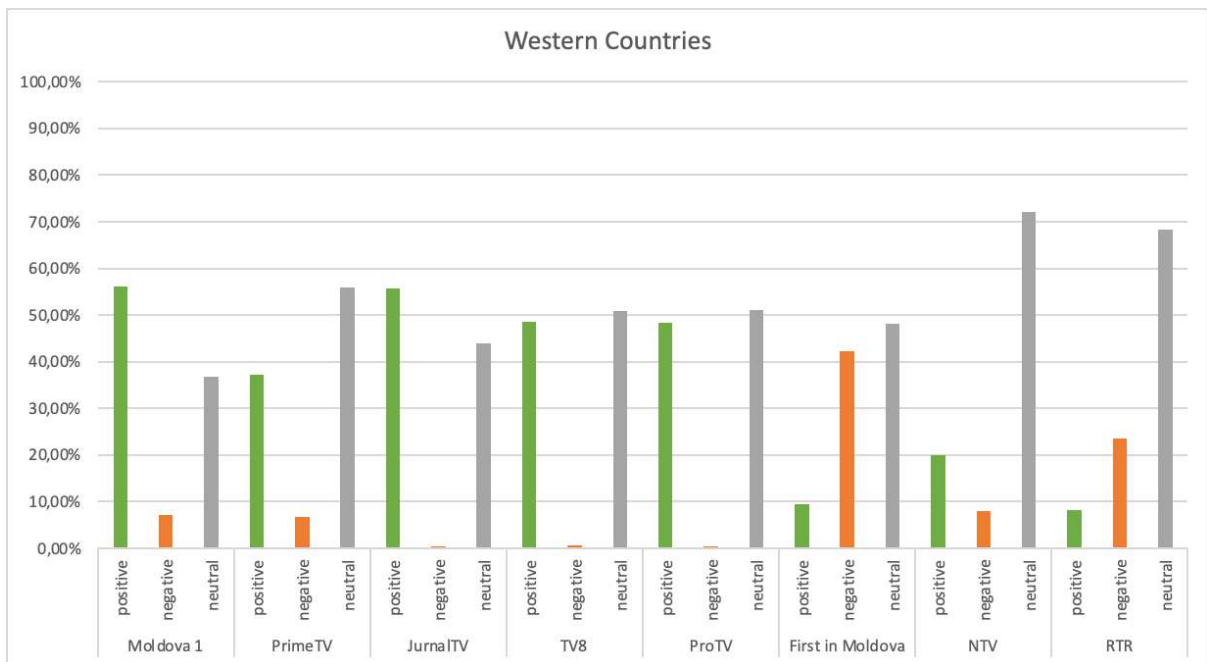


Chart no.17. Image of Western countries and entities in general on TV channels for the period December 2022-February 2023.

One issue that needs to be addressed is the remarkable difference between mentions of states and supranational entities versus leaders of these states and entities. This trend remains fairly constant and reflects a general favouring of states as political subjects over individuals. The impact of this discrepancy can be seen in people's perceptions of states versus presidents/representatives of institutions, where we generally find a much more positive attitude towards states than towards political leaders. However, there is also an important difference between trusting a leader, state, entity and perceiving them positively or negatively.

This may also explain the relatively low trust scores of foreign leaders by Moldovan citizens. Last but not least, a correlation can be observed between attitudes towards certain foreign states and respondents who speak Russian or Romanian. This observation may explain why the target group of users of pro-Russian TV channels, being largely the Russian-speaking population, shows a lower degree of trust towards certain Western states. These viewers are constantly subjected to news that considerably discredit Western political entities (see charts 15 and 16). The discrepancy between the language spoken and the attitude towards a foreign state can be seen in the chart below.

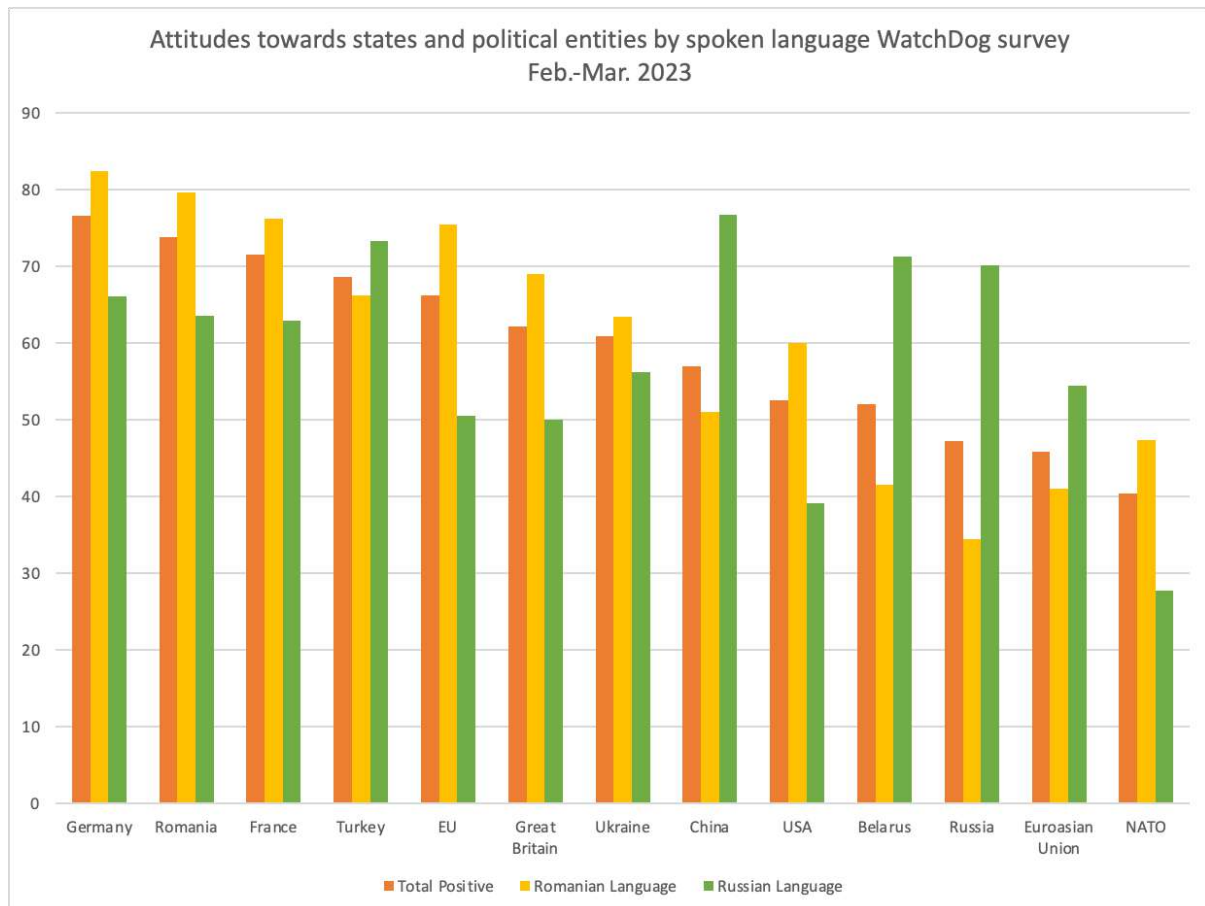


Chart no.18. WatchDog survey respondents' attitudes towards foreign countries.

Although Western states and their leaders are given less coverage in the domestic broadcasting space compared to Russia and Ukraine, the fact that the former are largely portrayed in a positive light compared to Russia and Belarus seems to generate an increasing trend in improving public opinion about them. There is also a change in perception among those who until recently considered Russia and President V. Putin a friend of Moldova. Slight upward trends can be seen in chart 16, as well as in chart 18, which represents the evolution of public agreement towards EU and Eurasian Union membership. As can be seen in chart 18, for the first time in 2023 in recent years, the share of those who agree with the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU exceeded the 50% threshold.

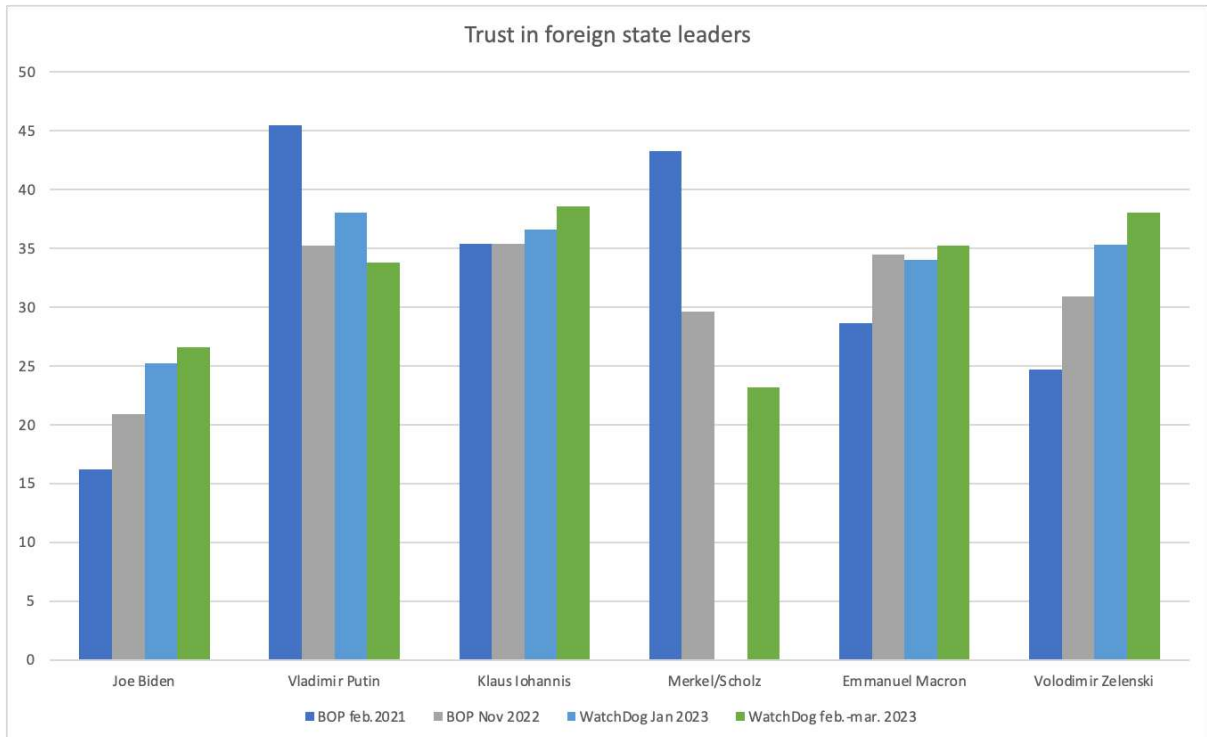


Chart no.19. Comparative evolution of the confidence of respondents to the BOP 2021, BOP 2022, WatchDog January 2023 and WatchDog February - March 2023 surveys in the leaders of foreign countries.

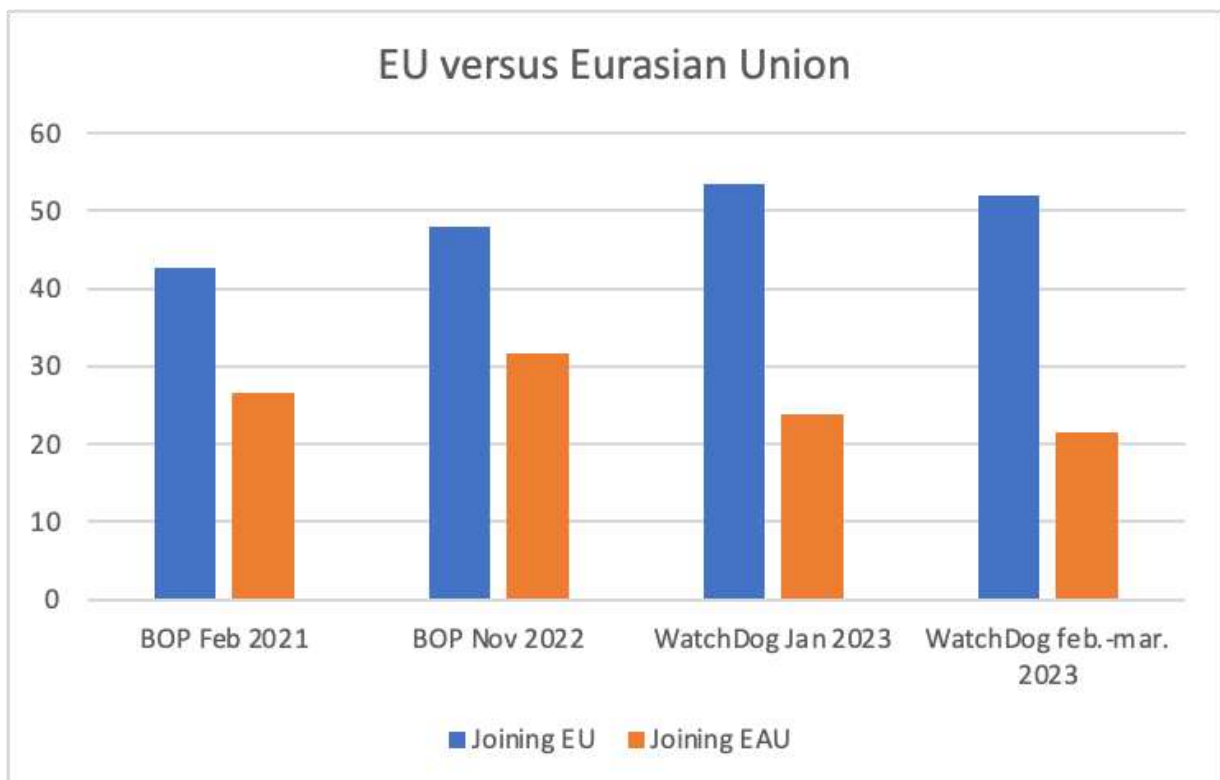


Chart no.20. Comparative evolution of respondents who are in favour of EU membership versus the Eurasian Union in the BOP 2021, BOP 2022, WatchDog January 2023 and WatchDog February - March 2023 polls versus leaders of external states.

Reflection of Ukraine in TV news

Ukraine was also predominant in TV news content from December 2022 to February 2023. This is natural given Russian aggression on its territory. In total the state was mentioned 1163 times and Volodymyr Zelensky 299 times. Proportionally analysing the mentions, the share of positive mentions is much higher than negative ones, i.e. 802 positive mentions compared to 44 negative ones. Ukraine accumulated a further 616 mentions rated as neutral.

The most news items mentioning Ukraine and Zelensky were broadcast by ProTV - 381 mentions of which not a single negative one and Jurnal TV - 365 mentions with only 3 negative ones.

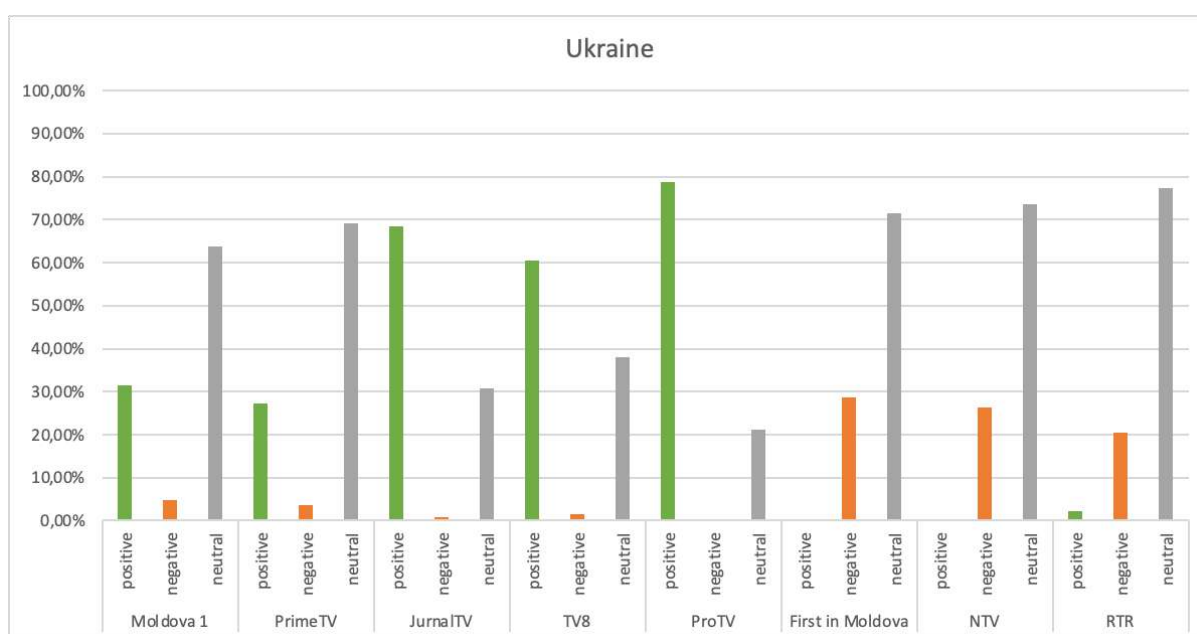


Chart no.21. Reflection of Ukraine's image on monitored TV channels.

Moldova 1 is the TV channel that has accumulated slightly more mentions evaluated as negative in its presentation of news about Ukraine. Of the total 229 mentions, 11 were perceived as negative, 146 neutral and 72 positive. Most news stories that created negative perceptions about Ukraine were presented towards the end of January and beginning of February 2023.

The content of these news items, however, does not indicate that the TV channel covered Ukraine in a biased way, but rather they referred to events that have a strong negative emotional impact and/or presented controversial topics.

One of these news items broadcast on 17 January 2023 refers to the Dnipro tragedy, the short summary of the news item being:

„Ukraine asks the West to speed up arms supplies after Russian forces hit a residential block in the town of Dnipro with rockets. Ukraine's General Staff said Russian artillery shelled 25 towns and villages around Bahmut and Avdeevka"¹².

Another example of a news story that is considered to have a negative emotional impact is the one about the Bovaří (Bovary) tragedy:

"A Ukrainian emergency service helicopter with 9 people on board crashed this morning near a residential building in the town of Bovaří (Bovary), Kyiv region"¹³.

However, the overall positive mentions of Ukraine are not correlated with a considerable change in the attitude of the population towards Ukraine and President V. Zelensky. However, the share of attitudes towards Ukraine is almost similar to the rising percentage of trust in the President of the United States of America and much more significant in percentage terms than the change in the President of Romania.

And in the case of Ukraine similar to Western countries, we can notice a 5-10% difference between the ratio of positive - negative attitude depending on the spoken language of the respondents. In the case of respondents whose language of communication is Russian, more than 30% still have a negative opinion about the neighbouring state.

Subject	BOP February 2021	BOP November 2022	WatchDog January 2023	WatchDog February-March 2023
Volodymyr Zelensky	24,7	30,9	35,3	38

Table No.2. Evolution of respondents' trust in President V. Zelensky according to BOP 2021, BOP 2022, WatchDog January 2023 and WatchDog February - March 2023 surveys.

¹² The news content can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mR1Irpbrf8>

¹³ The content of the news of 18.01.2023 can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4eSCE-B_4A

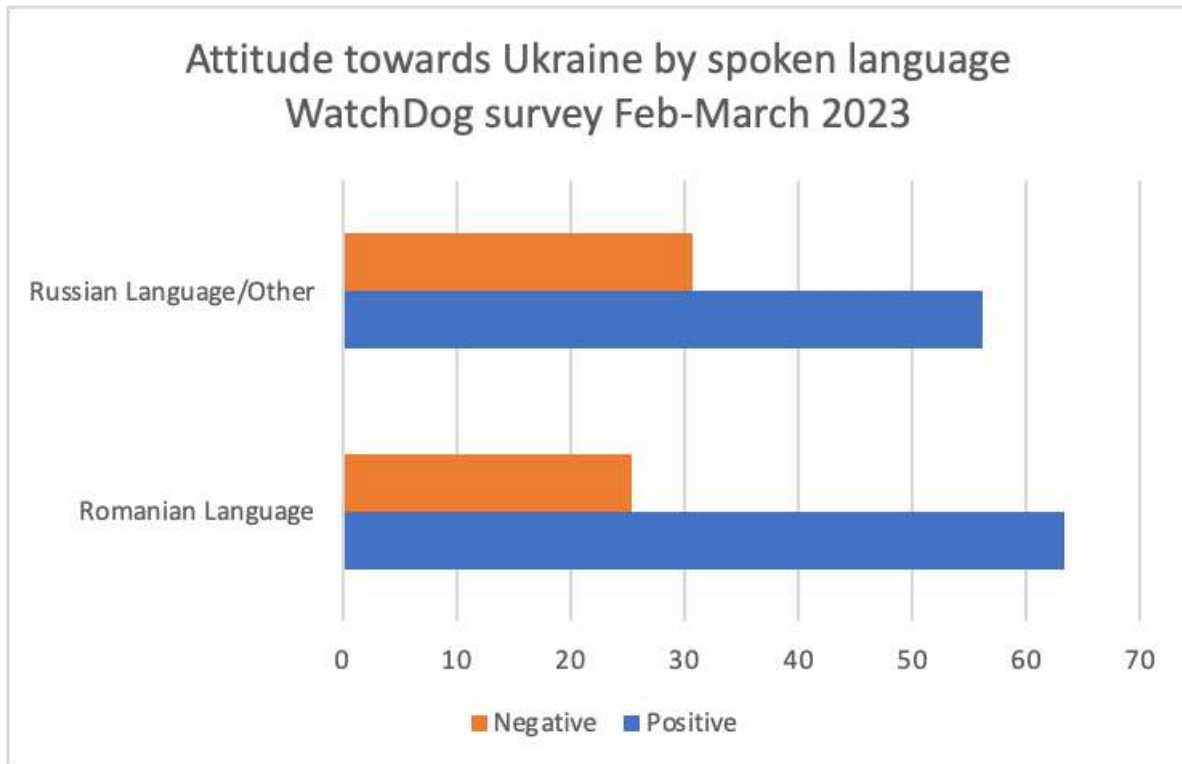


Chart no.22. Respondents' attitudes towards Ukraine by language spoken.

Russian Federation, Belarus, Eurasian Union and CSTO

Russia has been mentioned 1136 times in the news content broadcasted on the eight monitored TV channels. Among these, 823 mentions were regarded as portraying Russia in a negative light, 287 mentions were neutral, and 26 mentions were positive.

Vladimir Putin has accumulated a total of 220 mentions, ranking as the second international leader with the highest number of mentions, after Volodymyr Zelensky, which can be attributed to the ongoing war situation. Out of the 220 mentions, 171 portrayed the Russian president in a negative way, and 46 were considered neutral. Only 3 mentions were seen as providing a context that favours the Russian leader.

The state of Russia and its president were most frequently presented in the news on Pro TV channel, with 358 mentions, followed by Jurnal TV with 339 mentions. The fewest mentions about these subjects were observed on Prime TV.

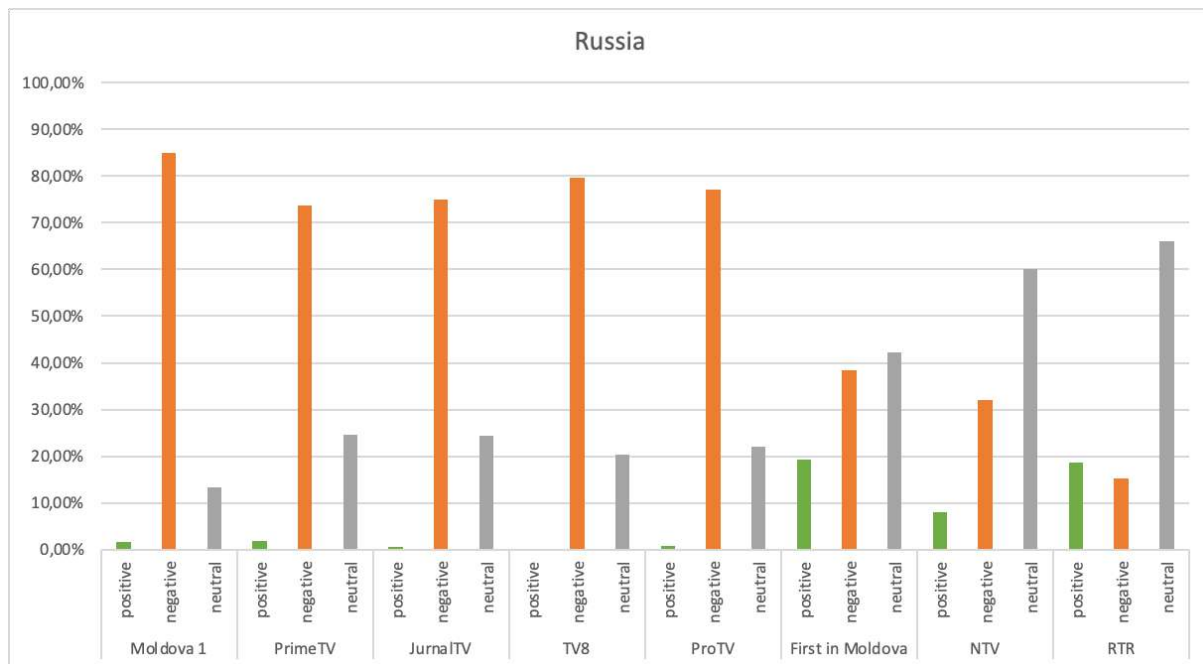


Chart No. 23. Portrayal of Russia's Image on Monitored TV Channels.

Among all eight monitored TV channels, *TV8* was the only one that did not broadcast any news presenting Russia in a favorable context. On the opposite end, the three TV channels whose licenses were suspended aired the most news items favoring Russia, with 11 mentions on *RTR* and 5 on *First in Moldova*.

For example, at the beginning of December 2022, *First in Moldova* aired a news report (repeated on December 5th and 6th, 2022) announcing that "the phytosanitary service of the Russian Federation, Rosselkhoznadzor, has decided to lift restrictions on agricultural products for an additional 12 agricultural producers from the Republic of Moldova"¹⁴.

Then, in another news report, *RTR* presents video footage showing the Russian leader conducting a working visit to inspect the Kerch Bridge¹⁵.

Belarus and A. Lukashenko together accumulated 80 mentions, of which the majority in the news were portrayed in a context evaluated as negative - 46 mentions, or neutral - 30 mentions. It is worth noting that, in comparison to the Russian Federation, Belarus was very minimally to almost not presented in the news on the TV channels whose licenses were suspended, accumulating only 3 mentions in two weeks of broadcasting in December 2022.

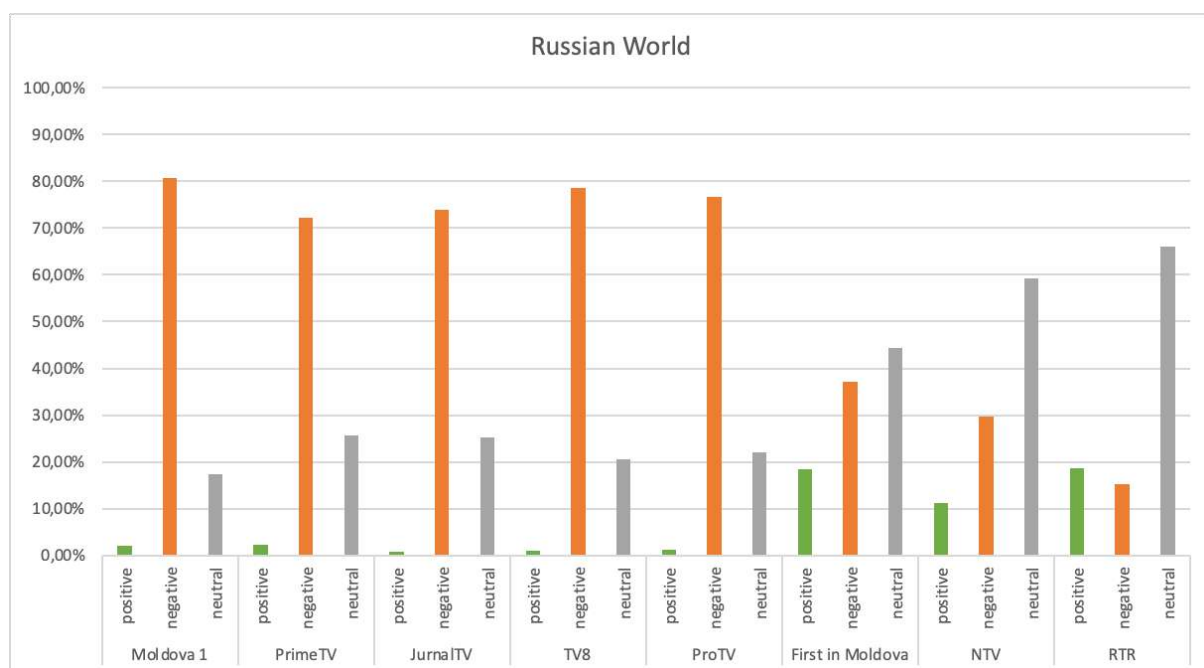
¹⁴ The news from December 6, 2022, can be viewed here:

<https://www.facebook.com/100063619463473/videos/658608202631671>

¹⁵ Watch the video here: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1507156169796365>

Subject ↓	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total
Russia	26	823	287	1136
V. Putin	3	171	46	220
General Russia	29	994	333	1356
Belarus	7	34	23	64
Lukashenko	1	8	7	16
Eurasian Union	0	0	1	1
CSTO	0	0	0	0
General Russian World	37	1036	364	1437

Table No. 3. Total Number of Mentions for the Russian Civilizational Space.



Graphic No. 24. Portrayal of the so-called Russian World Image on Monitored TV Channels.

Pro TV was the channel that had the most mentions portraying Belarus in a negative context - 10 mentions, being among the few that reported on the role of this state in the Russian aggression against Ukraine. For example, on December 20th, *Pro TV* aired a news report mentioning that Ukraine does not ignore the scenario of an attack from Belarusian territory:

“Kyiv is expecting a new major attack from Russia coming from Belarus, following Putin's visit to Minsk. Volodymyr Zelensky has called on the West to send more weapons to Ukraine in order to be prepared for all possible defence scenarios”¹⁶.

¹⁶ See details here: <https://youtu.be/HiG52Z-nBm0?t=1446>

Even though Belarus is an ally of Russia and discussions have taken place over the past year regarding this state's involvement in supporting the Russian aggression or the potential use of Belarusian territory for an attack on Ukraine, for the population of the Republic of Moldova, the (positive) perception of Belarus and its leader A. Lukashenko, as reflected in the surveys conducted in 2021 and 2023, has remained nearly unchanged:

	BOP February 2021	WatchDog January 2023	WatchDog Feb.-March 2023
Aleksandr Lukashenko	37,1%	35,0%	35,7%

Table No. 4. Evolution of respondents' favorable attitude towards A. Lukashenko according to survey data from BOP 2021, WatchDog January 2023, WatchDog February - March 2023.

Throughout the monitoring period, no news story referring to the Collective Security Treaty Organization, which includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan, was identified. Only a single news story on TV8 mentioned the Eurasian Economic Union in a neutral context.

The analysis of the impact of Russian propaganda narratives on public perception.

The study of the content of the news monitored from the 5 TV channels considered to be among the most influential in shaping public opinion shows that, despite not broadcasting news that promotes Kremlin propaganda and predominantly portraying Russia in a negative context, the main narratives of the Kremlin and the disinformation spread in its favor are overwhelmingly present in the public opinion of the Republic of Moldova.

The majority of falsehoods propagated by and for Russia in 2022 were related to war, followed by those about the energy crisis¹⁷ and others aimed at discrediting local governments.

In this section, we will address the falsehoods and myths propagated by and in favor of Russia to justify its aggression against Ukraine and to blame Ukraine for the current situation.

Both national¹⁸ and international¹⁹ analyses indicate that the most common falsehoods promoted in the media are those portraying the Russian invasion as a necessity to defend Russian-speaking residents in the Donbas region who are allegedly facing discrimination. These narratives also suggest that Ukraine is engaged in a process of "denazification" and "demilitarization."

¹⁷ See more information about the fakenews of the year 2022 at: <https://stopfals.md/ro/article/top-22-de-falsurile-anului-2022-180733>

¹⁸ Studies and materials conducted by stopfals.md.

¹⁹ The studies and analyses conducted by EU vs Disinformation, which can be accessed here: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/twelve-myths-about-russias-war-in-ukraine-exposed/>

This false narrative was vigorously promoted not only by Russian officials but also by President Vladimir Putin himself, who declared that the so-called "demilitarization" and "denazification" actions were meant to protect Russian-speaking individuals facing discrimination. Subsequently, these messages were heavily propagated by media outlets in the post-Soviet space sponsored by Russia and Telegram channels. The fact that official representatives endorse such messages carries significant weight for an audience that, for many years, had placed great trust in Putin and perceived Russia as its own world (in-group).

Furthermore, at the local level, political and religious representatives have propagated the false message that Russia was forced to initiate this war in order to "liberate" the people in Ukraine²⁰, thus fuelling the narrative of "denazification" and the "rescue of Russian-speaking individuals."

In the Republic of Moldova, according to surveys initiated by the WatchDog.MD Community, 12.0%²¹ of respondents still believe that there is an operation in Ukraine to liberate it from Nazism, a statement predominantly supported by Russian-speaking respondents. More importantly, 19.4% of respondents believe that in recent years, a "genocide of the Russian-speaking population by Ukrainian nationalists"²² has taken place in Donbass (Watchdog.md survey, January 2023). Just under half of all interviewed respondents approve the statement that the "Russian population in Ukraine has faced discrimination and genocide" - 40.4%, and 30.4% consider President Zelensky and his "regime" to be fascist (Watchdog.md survey, January 2023).

Additionally, in January 2023, 22.5% of respondents believed that Russia was defending the self-proclaimed republics in Donbass from Ukrainian attacks. This percentage increased to 26% among respondents who supported this statement in the February-March 2023 survey. Among the 22.5%, approximately one-third were Russian-speaking individuals with incomplete or general education.

Another set of narratives that deeply distort the role of international actors in the Russian-Ukrainian war portrays Russia as a victim under attack, forced to retaliate. This narrative also blames Western states for triggering the war. Russian leaders frequently claim that the conflict in Ukraine is actually against Western countries, intentionally started by them, and that Russia is fighting in Ukraine against NATO and Western states, compelled to defend itself from their aggression.

²⁰ See details here: <https://stopfals.md/ro/article/top-22-de-falsuri-ale-anului-2022-180733>

²¹ View the complete survey here: <https://www.watchdog.md/2023/02/03/comunitatea-watchdog-md-a-prezentat-rezultatele-unui-sondaj-de-opinie/>

²² Idem.

This type of messaging is often promoted at the national level by both Russian-language media and certain politicians who favor Russia²³ within national parties, and they are disseminated through their social media channels.

In the Republic of Moldova, 51.6% of respondents in the February-March 2023 survey believe in the assertion that Russia is actually fighting against NATO in Ukraine, which is 3.2% less than in January 2023. About the same number of people believe that Russia was actually threatened by Ukraine's desire to become a NATO member and have NATO military bases close to Russia - 51.6%. Respondents who share these opinions come from both Romanian and Russian-speaking backgrounds, with varying levels of education, and from both urban and rural areas.

From the surveys conducted by the Watchdog.MD community, we can observe that both the Russian Federation and the United States are considered two actors responsible for triggering the war (ranking second and third among respondents). Specifically, 17.7% of respondents attribute this to the United States, and 17.0% to Russia (January 2023), with these figures slightly increasing in the February-March survey, where 19.5% identify Russia as responsible for the war and 19.2% identify the United States (February-March 2023). The number of individuals who hold these views is proportional to the language spoken. Russian-speaking respondents are more likely to blame the United States for starting the war, while Romanian-speaking respondents believe that Russia and Putin personally (25.15%) are responsible for the war.

The constant dissemination of news by the mass media, attesting to Western countries' support for Ukraine, including arms deliveries, indirectly fuels and reinforces distorted perceptions among those who believe that the US and NATO play a key role in this war. As a result, Russia's message gains a semblance of truth. For instance, in one of the news reports broadcasted by Prime TV on February 8, 2023, titled "Tanks Will Arrive in March," messages about the delivery of military equipment from Germany to Ukraine are juxtaposed with a statement from the Russian defense minister, who claims that the "US does not want the war in Ukraine to end, but encourages Ukraine to seize Russian territories²⁴". On one hand, journalists attempt to provide a diversity of opinions, while on the other hand, they amplify the Kremlin's propagandistic narrative. The Russian minister's statement is unsupported by facts. In this manner, Russian propaganda manages to exploit the demands of balanced journalism for its dissemination.

News issued in this manner, even though they may initially portray Russia in a negative light and Western actors in a positive context, ultimately create a space in the collective mindset for Russian disinformation and foster scepticism towards EU states and institutions. This validates

²³ See details here: <https://stopfals.md/ro/article/top-22-de-falsuri-ale-anului-2022-180733>

²⁴ View the news here: <https://primelestiri.md/ro/primele-stiri-8-februarie-21-00---129441.html>

the "false truth" promoted by the aggressor in the war – Russia. Moreover, these news pieces sow distrust in defense institutions, creating an image of threat instead of conveying the opposite.

Therefore, it can be explained why the attitude towards NATO remains unfavorable in the Republic of Moldova – 55.5% of respondents are against the country's accession to NATO (WatchDog.MD survey, January 2023) – and why, in the current information environment, a decrease in those opposed is not anticipated. The media's impact on shaping public opinion regarding NATO is limited. On one hand, this is due to the limited number of news stories that portray this institution, and on the other hand, because over half of those against NATO are Russian speakers. TV channels that provide a balanced perspective on this institution are not widely available.

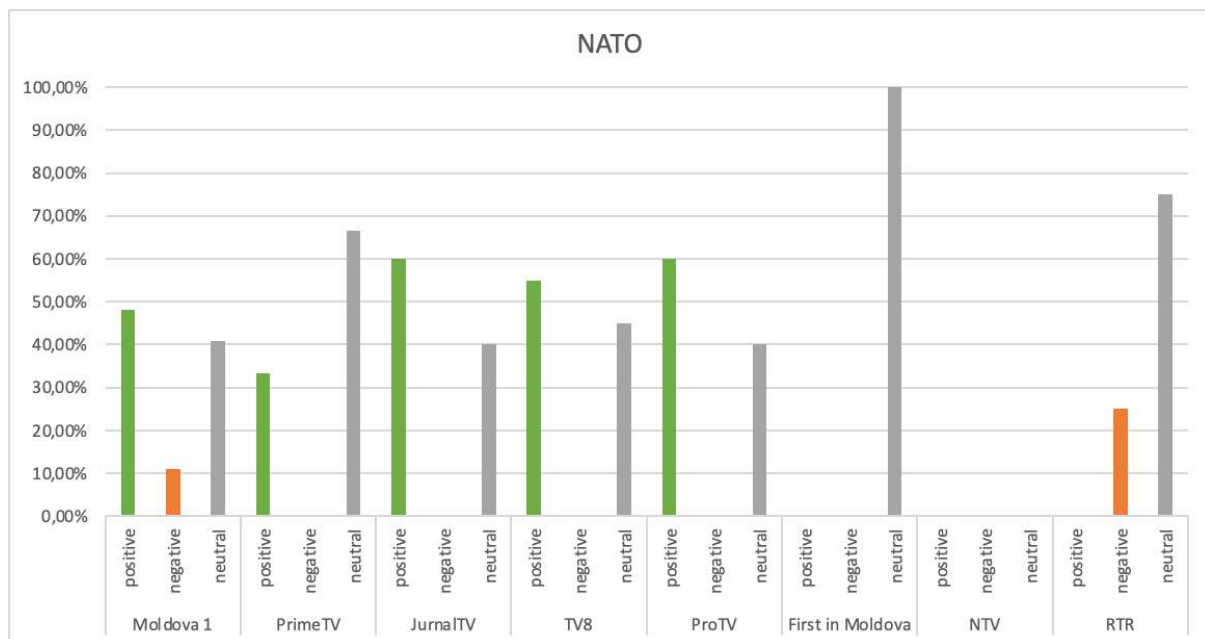


Chart No. 25. Share of NATO mentions in December 2022.

Turkey and China - in TV news

Turkey and its president, Recep Erdogan, have accumulated a total of 245 mentions in the news broadcasts of the monitored eight TV channels. The number of negative mentions attributed to both subjects is nearly double (93 mentions) compared to the positive ones (39 mentions). Meanwhile, Turkey has been mentioned in a neutral context in 113 news items out of the total. Out of the 245 cases that addressed the subject, the Turkish leader was mentioned only 46 times.

In comparison, China's leader, Xi Jinping, has been mentioned in the TV news only 5 times out of a total of 100 news stories that covered topics related to China. Out of these 100 mentions, 18 cases were evaluated as presenting China in a negative context.

Subject↓	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total	Positive/negative ratio
Turkey	25	88	86	199	-63
Recep Erdogan	14	5	27	46	9
General Turkey	39	93	113	245	-54
China	15	18	62	95	-3
Xi Jinping	0	0	5	5	0
General China	15	18	67	100	-3

Table No. 5. Total Number of Mentions for Turkey and China in the period December 2022 - February 2023.

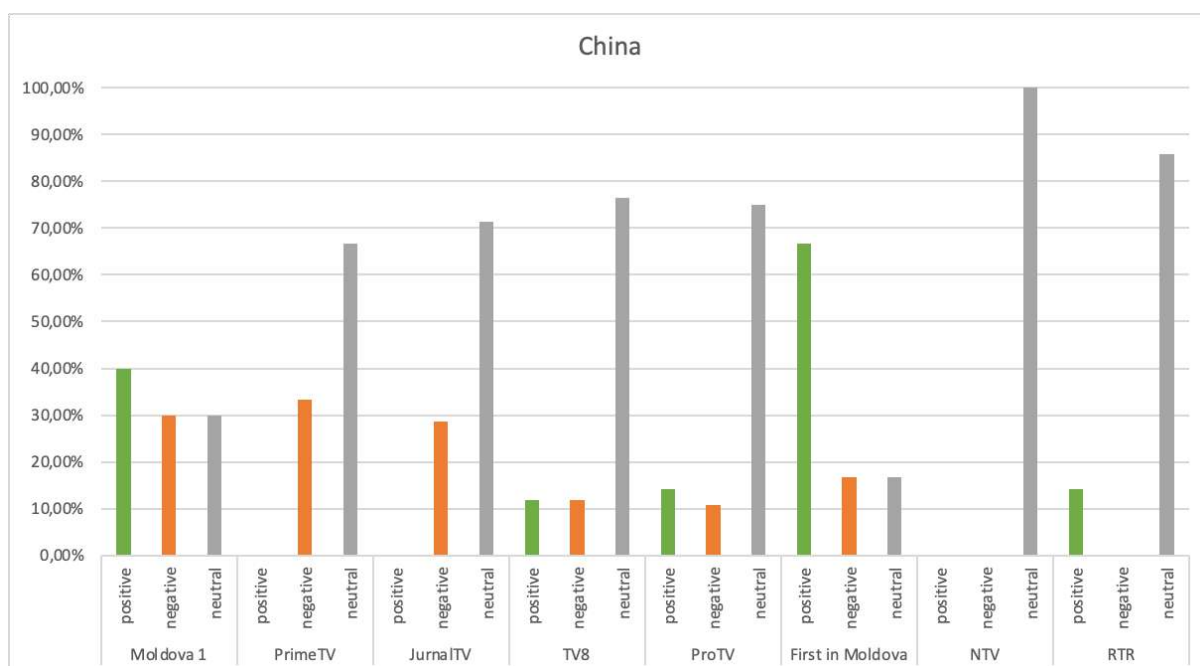


Chart No. 26. Proportion of China mentions in the period December 2022 - February 2023.

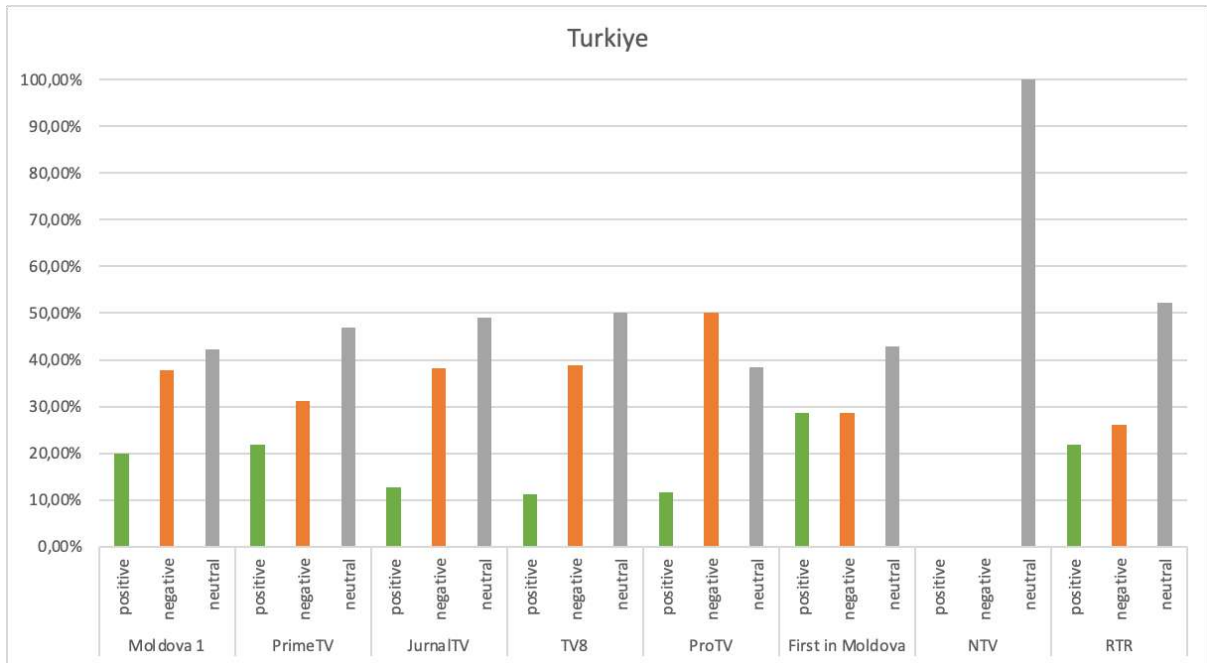


Chart No. 27. Proportion of China mentions in the period December 2022 – February 2023.

Among all the TV channels, *Pro TV* was the one that addressed topics related to or correlated with Turkey the most frequently – 52 mentions, followed by *Jurnal TV* – 47 mentions, and *Moldova1* – 45 mentions. Also, *Pro TV* featured topics related to China the most frequently – a total of 28 mentions. Regarding China, the proportion of news stories that portrayed the subject in a negative context is almost insignificant and relatively proportional across all monitored channels.

Returning to Turkey, the increase in the number of news stories mentioning this country and its leader significantly intensified in February 2023, following a devastating earthquake that struck Turkey and Syria on February 6, 2023, causing many casualties. As a result, most news reports that conveyed information about victims and disaster were considered to have a negative impact. However, the portrayal of news about Turkey, deemed to be in an unfavorable context, did not influence the reputation of the Turkish president among the population of the Republic of Moldova in any way, remaining at a confidence level of around 30% among respondents (WatchDog.MD survey, January 2023; February-March 2023).

Conclusions and Recommendations

In the Republic of Moldova, television continues to be one of the most important sources of information, alongside the internet. While citizens' trust in television is decreasing, especially in Russian-language or Russian-origin TV channels broadcasted in Moldova, trust in domestic TV channels remains predominantly steady for about half of the country's population. What is currently lacking is an understanding of what the citizens of the Republic of Moldova perceive as domestic media versus foreign media. In this context, (1) we recommend initiating a more detailed measurement of the population's perception of the national audiovisual landscape.

From monitoring 8 TV channels in the months of December 2022, January, and February 2023, it is evident that the trend among TV stations to predominantly present actors like the Russian Federation in a negative context and Ukraine in a positive and neutral context continues. Another noteworthy observation is that, although external actors from Western Europe and the USA (Germany, the United Kingdom, France, EU, and NATO) are consistently present in the audiovisual space of the Republic of Moldova, they still occupy a marginalized position in the total foreign news coverage when mentioned as separate entities (countries). Furthermore, in relation to these subjects, a neutral presentation predominates (suggesting that they are mentioned in passing and do not actually form the main content of the news), and positive or factually negative presentations are less common.

Among the group of Western actors and entities, the European Union stood out as the only one that, on one hand, was mentioned much more frequently and, on the other hand, was often presented in a positive context (Graph 7), which is reflected in the measurement of public opinion among those who support the country's accession to the European Union.

It is necessary to highlight that in the news broadcasted on the monitored channels, there is a trend observed for all reporting subjects to relate more to a country or entity as a whole, rather than to the leaders and presidents representing those countries or entities. The limited attention given by nationally broadcasted news to the president of a foreign country may partially explain why the reputation (or trust, as operationalized in surveys) of country leaders changes relatively slowly in the national collective mindset.

Thus, if we comparatively analyze society's opinion about countries and their leaders, we can easily observe that the citizens of the Republic of Moldova are more open to evaluating a country positively or negatively than a president. Therefore, we can suggest that the constant mentions of the European Union and the clear emphasis on its role in foreign policy in the news broadcasted on monitored channels have contributed to a greater openness of the population towards the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the European Union. The latest relevant survey (January 2023) recorded a figure that exceeded the 50% threshold.

Based on these observations, we suggest the following:

Increase the coverage not only of countries but also of the leaders of these countries in the news, in order to enhance citizens' familiarity with their roles, personalities, and activities.

Consider evaluating the general attitude towards leaders of countries, rather than just focusing on the level of trust citizens have in them. Using a similar operationalization for attitudes towards actors and states will help us understand whether individuals perceive terms like "trust" (a higher impact and value-laden indicator) and "liking" (a more moderate impact with a higher degree of depersonalization) differently or not.

Even though during two out of the three months of monitoring the broadcasting license of three TV stations was suspended (*NTV, RTR, and First in Moldova*), the short period in which these stations operated still revealed the same trend identified in the previous study. Specifically, the three stations with suspended licenses continued to portray Western actors more negatively and the Russian Federation in a more neutral or positive context compared to other TV stations.

The suspension of licenses for the three TV stations has indeed led to a reduction in the available audiovisual options for citizens at the national level. This, as we anticipate, may have contributed to an increase in the popularity of *TV8, Jurnal TV, and Pro TV*. However, the analysis of surveys reveals that the target audience for viewers of the eight monitored channels differs. For instance, *Jurnal TV and Pro TV* are preferred by Romanian speakers, while *RTR* and *NTV* are favored by Russian speakers. This reality suggests that even though the media impact of *TV8, Jurnal TV, and Pro TV* has grown, these channels predominantly do not cater to Russian-speaking citizens. In the absence of alternative TV information sources, Russian speakers are seeking resources available online, on social media, or through other innovative methods to access Russian-language TV stations, which might make them more susceptible to disinformation. Therefore, this helps explain why there are discrepancies in the population's perception of subjects and geopolitical vectors based on the language used, and why there still exists a somewhat favorable opinion (albeit at a lower level) towards Russia.

To contribute to reducing these discrepancies, we recommend the following:

(4) Equidistant TV stations should engage the Russian-speaking audience by producing shows and content tailored to their linguistic and cultural preferences;

(5) Increase the frequency of addressing Russian propaganda narratives regarding the war in Ukraine in TV programs, and provide arguments debunking these narratives. This should also include distributing fact-checking of these narratives on social media channels and Telegram;

(6) Clarify the roles of different states in the war (direct involvement, indirect support to the parties, etc.);

(7) Increase the number of high-quality analytical and foreign policy programs that impartially discuss topics of importance for the Republic of Moldova, both on television and in the online environment.

These recommendations are aimed at reducing the existing disparities in perception, fostering a more balanced media landscape, and providing clearer information to the diverse population of the Republic of Moldova.