

(DE)FORMATION OF POLITICAL ACTORS' PUBLIC IMAGE THROUGH MASS MEDIA

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Abstract: The general objective of this study was to examine how the activities of a state leader are represented in the media of another country and to assess the quality of this media portrayal. At the international level, a country's president serves as the highest representative of the state; therefore, a strong and constructive media presence on the global stage can support diplomatic and economic efforts, contribute to attracting foreign investment, strengthen trade relations, and reinforce the country's standing within various international organizations.

The primary research method employed was content analysis, which enabled the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data and facilitated a comprehensive understanding of how the activities of the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, were covered by RIA Novosti - a news agency specializing in international information and owned by the Government of the Russian Federation. The research demonstrated that state-owned media institutions tend to promote specific agendas, which are often shaped by the political and economic interests of the state or its leadership. Consequently, the portrayal of a foreign president's activity in another country's media is significantly influenced by the nature of bilateral relations between the two states.

Keywords: *international press, RIA Novosti news agency, journalistic materials, head of state, public image, media representation.*

At the international level, the image of a state and of its leader is shaped through the information circulating within the open communication network concerning the current reality of that country and the activities of its president. Among the institutions that produce and disseminate such content in the public sphere, the media occupies a special place. The way in which the reality of one country is portrayed in the media of another country largely depends on the relations between the two states, as well as on the type of media regime present in those societies. Generally, if the relations between two states are good, the media in one country reflects the reality of the neighboring country and the activity of its leader either positively or neutrally, but practically never negatively. Conversely, if the relations between two states are tense, the media in one country reflects the reality of the neighboring country and the activity of its leader either negatively or neutrally, but almost never positively. It should be noted that the media regimes existing within a society also leave

their mark on the way in which foreign realities are covered. In countries with authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, media activity is oriented toward supporting the state's official policy, while in democratic states, it aims to inform the public objectively and promptly.

These findings emerged as a result of research aimed at identifying the quality of a country's representation in the media of another country when relations between the two states are strained. Considering that, in recent times, our country has had tense relations with Russia—marked, among other things, by the expulsion of diplomats, we set out to select a media institution from that country for analysis. Thus, in order to achieve the proposed goal, the chosen object of study was the RIA Novosti news agency—an institution specialized in the production of international information and owned by the Government of the Russian Federation.

The study was conducted based on five analytical criteria, each with its own research variables. The first criterion—the form of journalistic expression—included five research variables: the news story, the interview, the report, the commentary, and the political analysis. The second criterion—the narrative context in which the information was placed—had three research variables: positive context, negative context, and neutral context. The third criterion—the number of information sources used in the journalistic material—had three research variables: one source, two sources, and three or more sources. The fourth criterion—the techniques used to construct the image of the political leader—had four research variables: blatant lie, repetition of information, assertion, and indication of the enemy. The fifth and final criterion—the images accompanying the text—had four research variables: photograph, symbolic image, graphic image, and no image.

The activity of the RIA Novosti news agency was examined through direct monitoring of its news flow over a three-month period (December 1, 2023 – February 29, 2024). This period was chosen based on the assumption that the most accurate results could be obtained from information collected during ordinary periods of stability, such as the last month of 2023 and the first two months of 2024. The subsequent months of 2024, being part of an electoral year, were marked by maximum political turbulence, which also influenced media activity.

The first analytical criterion concerned the form of journalistic expression. The research conducted according to this criterion revealed that during the monitored period, the RIA Novosti news agency produced 30 materials about the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu. The analysis, in terms of the form of journalistic expression, highlighted that all the materials published by RIA Novosti within the specified timeframe were presented in the format of news reports (see Table 1).

Table 1. Forms of expression of the journalistic materials disseminated by RIA Novosti

Form of Journalistic Expression	News	Interview	Report	Commentary	Analysis
Published materials	30	0	0	0	0
Total 100%	100%	0	0	0	0

Source: Elaborated by the author

The fact that the agency focused exclusively on delivering raw information about current realities, without employing other journalistic forms to reflect the activity of the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, at first glance creates the impression that the media coverage was conducted objectively, in line with the principles of informative journalism. However, this impression quickly disappears, being dispelled by the very titles of the published materials. Here are several examples of news headlines that appeared during the mentioned period: An expert believes that Sandu is preparing Moldova for war (RIA Novosti, December 1, 2023); The former leader of Gagauzia says that Sandu is organizing a “political inquisition” (RIA Novosti, December 6, 2023); The Moldovan opposition urged mayors “not to yield to Sandu’s blackmail” (RIA Novosti, December 7, 2023); Sandu believes that Russia will try to destabilize the situation in Moldova (RIA Novosti, December 19, 2023); Sandu wants to be re-elected in order to sever ties with the CIS (RIA Novosti, December 24, 2023); An expert claims that Sandu is indifferent to the opinion of the residents of Gagauzia and the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic (RIA Novosti, December 25, 2023); The Moldovan opposition believes that Sandu has usurped the idea of European integration (RIA Novosti, December 25, 2023); In Gagauzia, the referendum on Moldova’s accession to the EU was described as Sandu’s PR maneuver (RIA Novosti, December 25, 2023); The Moldovan opposition condemns the referendum on EU accession (RIA Novosti, December 30, 2023); Militarism and dictatorship have become the ideology of the Moldovan president, claims an expert (RIA Novosti, January 12, 2024); The Moldovan opposition accuses Sandu of establishing a dictatorship (RIA Novosti, February 20, 2024); Dodon says that Sandu is deliberately obstructing Russia’s presidential elections (RIA Novosti, February 2, 2024); In Moldova, an opposition deputy accused Sandu of usurping power (RIA Novosti, February 1, 2024); The Renaissance Party calls for unity against Sandu’s re-election (RIA Novosti, January 30, 2024), etc. These examples clearly demonstrate that the RIA Novosti agency selectively chooses events and portrays the activity of the President of the Republic of Moldova in a biased manner, with manipulative elements being present even in the news headlines. Despite the fact that, in most cases, these are quote-based titles containing statements or declarations made by interlocutors, their message is profoundly negative and visibly “anti-Sandu.”

The second analytical criterion concerned the context in which information about the activity of the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, was presented. The quantitative aspects of the results obtained according to this criterion are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Narrative contexts in which the information about the president of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, was placed in the journalistic materials disseminated by RIA Novosti

Context in which the information was placed	Positive context	Negative context	Neutral context
Published Materials	0	23	7
Total 100%	0%	76,67%	23,33%

Source: Elaborated by the author

It can be observed that during the monitored period, in 23 out of the 30 journalistic materials analyzed, the events were placed in negative contexts, highlighting a predominantly critical approach toward the current President of the Republic of Moldova. Moreover, two-thirds of the total analyzed content—76.7%—presented information from a predominantly negative perspective, thereby reinforcing the impression that Maia Sandu is incompetent and that her activity lacks success. This approach was deliberately employed to shape a negative perception of the President of the Republic of Moldova and to distort her public image, with the implicit aim of influencing the electoral sentiment among the Moldovan diaspora in the Russian Federation. The remaining seven news articles, representing 23.3% of the total analyzed materials, placed the information within neutral contexts.

It is evident that, during the monitored period, RIA Novosti did not publish a single article with a positive context, which demonstrates the complete absence of any favorable portrayal of President Maia Sandu in this media institution. Such an imbalance reveals RIA Novosti's editorial bias toward content that portrays Maia Sandu unfavorably as head of state. The predominance of negative contexts strongly influences public opinion, leading to an unfavorable and possibly exaggerated perception of the President.

The third analytical criterion concerns the number of information sources used in the journalistic materials. The conducted research shows that, during the monitoring period, 26 articles were based on only one source, representing 86.67% of the total, while four articles relied on two sources, accounting for 13.33% of the total (see Table 3).

Table 3. Number of information sources used in the journalistic materials about the president of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, disseminated by RIA Novosti

Number of information sources used in the journalistic material	1 source	2 source	3 or more sources
Published materials	26	4	0
Total 100 %	86,67%	13,33%	0%

Source: Elaborated by the author

It becomes evident that none of the materials published by RIA Novosti employed three or more documentation sources, with the overwhelming majority of news items relying on a single source. The absence of reports supported by three or more sources indicates a potential deficiency in how RIA Novosti journalists reflect the Moldovan reality and, at the same time, reveals the institution's lack of commitment to good journalistic practices that require a deep and rigorous approach to the covered situations. In the contemporary media landscape, it is difficult to convey the multidimensionality of events or the complexity of political contexts, and to offer readers a nuanced understanding of the subject under discussion, without using information obtained from diverse documentary sources.

It should be noted that RIA Novosti journalists, in most cases, resort to unofficial sources, quoting statements made by pro-Russian experts or opposition politicians, without presenting readers with an alternative perspective expressed by a second source. Such an approach can distort public perceptions regarding the activity of the head of state, since materials based on a single source often provide a fragmented and unbalanced view of the addressed topic. Moreover, the lack of diversity in sources may lead to one-sided representations and significantly undermine the quality of the information presented. Likewise, the exclusive reliance on a single source of documentation can reinforce pre-existing stereotypes and clichés, generate new assumptions and rumors, and increase the risk of exaggeration or misinterpretation of facts.

The selective and tendentious choice of sources, along with their dominance in the narrative structure of journalistic materials, represents a practice frequently employed by RIA Novosti, despite being widely regarded as flawed, as it manipulates public opinion. When applied to the coverage of Moldovan political reality, this practice leads to the distortion of perceptions among Russian-speaking audiences worldwide concerning the decisions taken by the President of the Republic of Moldova or the events in which she has participated, thereby contributing to the misrepresentation of her image in the informational space.

The next analytical criterion aimed to identify the techniques used by RIA Novosti journalists to construct the public image of the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu. Four media techniques most frequently used in projecting the public image of a political leader were selected as

research variables: blatant lie, repetition of information, assertion, and indication of the enemy. The quantitative aspects of the results obtained based on this criterion are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Techniques used by RIA Novosti to construct the public image of the president of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu

Techniques used to construct the image of the head of state	Blatant lie	Repetition of information	Assertion	Indication of the enemy
Published materials	10	4	19	8

Source: Elaborated by the author

Attention should be drawn to the fact that the number of techniques listed in the table exceeds the total number of analyzed materials, since several articles employed two or more of these techniques simultaneously. For this reason, it was not possible to determine the exact proportion of each technique in relation to the others.

As can be observed, in reflecting the activity of the head of state of the Republic of Moldova, RIA Novosti journalists most frequently used the assertion technique. The particularity of this technique lies in the fact that the media, in supporting its own theses, prefers to use statements made by certain categories of politicians rather than presenting the perspectives of all sides, thereby limiting pluralism and providing only one point of view and a single facet of reality - the one most convenient to the outlet. In the context of this research, it is evident that, in order to reinforce the Kremlin's rhetoric, the agency extensively employs the statements of opposition political actors. The majority of the declarations included in the analyzed materials belong either to pro-Russian experts or to certain Moldovan politicians, such as Igor Dodon, Marina Tauber, or Irina Vlah. This demonstrates that RIA Novosti adopts a unilateral, biased, and subjective approach, presenting only one version of reality—the one favorable to the Moscow government.

The second most frequently used technique was that of blatant lie. The defining feature of this technique is the combination of plausible real facts, implausible real facts, and entirely fabricated facts. The latter category generally attracts attention and arouses public interest, dispelling doubts regarding the idea promoted by the media outlet and prompting the audience to accept it uncritically. This technique was most frequently employed when covering the political actions of opposition parties, with the aim of favoring their image through distortion of facts and contexts. For instance, in news reports about opposition-organized rallies, information was presented through a mixture of the three types of facts, thereby creating the false impression that these rallies were large-scale

and held regularly. The intended effect was to suggest that protests occur frequently in the Republic of Moldova and that the reason for their organization lies in the policies pursued by Maia Sandu.

The third-ranked technique, that of indicating the enemy, is based on the principle that the media conveys messages not only in favor of certain actors but also against others—whether real or imagined enemies. This technique was most often used in covering Maia Sandu’s political actions and the events in which she participated. It demonstrates that the news agency sought to construct a negative image of President Sandu by constantly promoting the idea that the head of state, being an advocate of pro-European policies, is responsible for the deterioration of relations between Russia and the Republic of Moldova.

The repetition of information technique, ranked last, is grounded in the notion that if a message is repeated frequently enough, it will eventually be accepted by the public and become part of collective consciousness. An ideal form of this technique involves the use of slogans and keywords. The fact that this technique was used only four times can be attributed to the nature of the media outlet, since a news agency primarily focuses on processing and distributing current information rather than engaging in repetitive messaging.

The final analytical criterion aimed to clarify the types of images used by RIA Novosti in journalistic materials covering the social, political, and economic life of Moldova. The analysis conducted from this perspective demonstrates that the Russian news agency primarily used archival photographs to illustrate the reality of the Republic of Moldova and the activities of its president (see Table 5).

Table 5. Types of images used in journalistic materials about the president of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, disseminated by RIA Novosti

Types of images	Photograph	Symbolic image	Graphic image	No image
Published materials	29	1	0	0
Total 100%	97,67%	3,33%	0%	0%

Source: Elaborated by the author

For the recognition and amplification of the textual message, RIA Novosti journalists used either official photographs of Maia Sandu or of the individuals whose statements formed the basis of the published materials, or archival photographs taken during past events. Only in one case did they resort to a symbolic image, which depicted the flag of the Republic of Moldova alongside that of the European Union.

The tendency to extensively use archival photographs can be explained, on the one hand, by the fact that RIA Novosti journalists do not

have the possibility to attend events in the Republic of Moldova in order to take authentic photographs. On the other hand, many media institutions in the Republic of Moldova publish on their official websites both textual and iconographic information about ongoing events, which can be retrieved and used in other journalistic materials, provided that the source is indicated. The same applies to iconographic content disseminated on social media platforms.

Thus, the results of the research on how RIA Novosti reflected the reality of the Republic of Moldova and the activity of President Maia Sandu allow us to conclude that the information concerning the activity of the head of state was presented predominantly in negative contexts; that traditional techniques for constructing the image of a political leader were employed to criticize and discredit the President's activity; and that the media image of Maia Sandu shaped by this institution was an explicitly negative one. In alignment with the official position of the Kremlin, RIA Novosti portrayed Moldovan reality, especially political reality in a biased, unbalanced, and one-sided manner. The journalistic effort was clearly oriented toward distorting public perceptions of Moldovan realities, misrepresenting the image of the head of state, and influencing the electoral sentiment within the Moldovan diaspora in the Russian Federation.

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