

NARRATIVES WITH POWER:

Using the SCORE to detect the effect of polarising narratives on Moldova's social fabric.



About SeeD and SCORE

About SCORE Moldova 2022

The 2022 iteration of the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Index¹ in Moldova² was implemented in 2022 – 2023 by the Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development (SeeD)³ funded by USAID. The SCORE in Moldova was first implemented in 2017 by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in partnership with SeeD. In 2022, the SCORE in Moldova is accompanied by a parallel study on the left bank of the Nistru/Dniester River, implemented by the United Nations in Moldova.

The aim of SCORE Moldova 2022 was to support fostering cohesion among different segments of Moldovan society, promoting unity, understanding perceptions and attitudes from across the country, particularly given Moldova's trajectory for European integration, and providing meaningful alternatives to divisive disinformation narratives.

Data for SCORE Moldova 2022 was collected by Magenta Consulting⁴ between 11 August and 29 November 2022, with a total representative national sample of 1,991 adult respondents in the Republic of Moldova⁵. Additional representative booster samples were collected in Balti municipality (N=110), UTA Gagauzia (N=116) and respondents aged 18 to 35 (N=119), bringing the total sample to 2,336. Data was weighted to ensure representativeness, where necessary.

The SCORE Index uses a mixed-methods participatory research approach, including multi-level stakeholder and expert consultations to design and calibrate context-specific indicators and develop pertinent conceptual models to answer the research objectives. Following data collection and analysis, results are shared and reviewed with key stakeholders, ensuring local ownership of results and the relevance of findings and recommendations.

Additional reports in this series⁶ include: Moldova at a Crossroads – Using the SCORE to understand the future visions of Moldovan citizens; Strengthening the Bonds – a Report on the social dynamics in Moldovan society; Building Peace Across the Nistru – Using the SCORE to Identify Entry Points for Reintegration of the Left Bank. The SCORE data platform can be used to identify and prioritise target population groups as well as geographical locations for social cohesion interventions app.scoreforpeace.org/en/Moldova/datasets.

About SeeD

SeeD works with international development organisations, governments, and civil society to design and implement people-centred evidence-based strategies for promoting peaceful, inclusive, and resilient societies. The SCORE Index was developed in Cyprus through the joint efforts of SeeD and UNDP's Action for Cooperation and Trust programme (UNDP-ACT), with USAID funding. SCORE examines and quantifies two main components of resilient peace: reconciliation and social cohesion.

This report was prepared by Orestis Panayiotou, Christoforos Pissarides and Alexander Guest at SeeD.

¹ For more information about the SCORE methodology, visit app.scoreforpeace.org.

² For more on SCORE Moldova and to see more of the results, visit app.scoreforpeace.org/en/Moldova/datasets.

³ For more about SeeD, see seedsofpeace.eu.

⁴ See consulting.md.

⁵ ±2.2% error margin at a 95% confidence interval. Multistage randomisation was applied, taking into account groups of districts, households, and respondents.

⁶ Available on <https://app.scoreforpeace.org/en/publications>

Introduction

While Moldova has made progress in press freedom rankings⁷, the media landscape is still heavily influenced by political leaders, oligarchs, and external actors. This results in a challenging media environment, split between pro-Russian and pro-EU factions⁸⁹. Using data from Moldova's Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Index (SCORE), this report examines Moldovans' media consumption habits, including their preferred media and editorial perspectives, and the problematic narratives that are prevalent in Moldova, aiming to better understand citizens' attitudes towards the media and towards issues that are concerning Moldovans today. Overall, the report underscores the importance of addressing problematic narratives to support human rights and social cohesion in Moldova.

The report first provides an overview of Moldovan citizens' preferred television (TV) channels, websites, and social media for following the news and socio-political issues. Particular attention is given to two groups, who may be more vulnerable to exposure to disinformation and misinformation: Moldovan youth (citizens under the age of 35) and native Russian speakers in Moldova. Second, the report analyses how different media sources shape Moldovan citizens' endorsement of often polarising geopolitical narratives and how these, in turn, influence key aspects of social cohesion. Lastly, the report provides insights into various audience segments of the population and their characteristics including their socio-political attitudes and future visions.

Executive Summary: Key Findings and Recommendations

According to the analyses, TV is the medium most consumed by the Moldovan population, with Prime TV, Moldova 1TV, and Pro TV being the top-rated channels. Russian-speaking Moldovans prefer RTR Moldova and NTV/HTB, while the younger generation prefers Jurnal and news websites such as jurnal.md, Facebook and YouTube are the most favoured social media platforms for news consumption. However, people tend to prioritise availability and timing over quality when consuming news.

- The different groups should be targeted through their preferred channels and sources of media. It is also important to consider the popularity of social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube for reaching a wider audience. However, efforts should be made to maintain the quality of the news being shared, even if availability and timing are the most important factors for consumers.

Several problematic narratives have been identified underlined by three distinct themes: narratives that present *Russia as a stabilising force* in the region, narratives that present *Russia as a threat*, and *Euroscepticism*. Narratives portraying Russia as a regional stabilising force are moderately supported by the wider population and more strongly by Russian-speaking Moldovans. These tend to be propagated by Russian-leaning media such as NTV/HTB, RTR Moldova, and Primul. Additionally, narratives presenting Russia as a regional threat are also widely endorsed especially by Romanian-speaking Moldovans. These tend to be disseminated by EU-leaning media such as Jurnal TV, Pro TV, and TV8.

- The mixed views on Russia's role in the region present a risk for social cohesion. Education and awareness-raising programmes can add clarity and enable consensus building in Moldova on the role of Russia in the country, preventing these views from forming a rift among the population.
- Efforts should be made to combat the propagation and prevalence of these mixed narratives by targeting the aforementioned channels and promoting balanced and fact-checked reporting.

⁷ <https://rsf.org/en/country/moldova>

⁸ Wagnsson C, Lundström M. Ringing true? The persuasiveness of Russian strategic narratives. *Media, War & Conflict*. 2022;17506352221101273.

⁹ *Journal of Democracy*, "The Kremlin's Trojan Horses"

- Focus should be placed on targeting the specific linguistic groups to de-escalate problematic narratives that can exacerbate social cohesion.

Euro-scepticism is also very prevalent in Moldova and appears to have a detrimental effect on social relations within the country, especially between the different linguistic groups.

- Outreach and dialogue efforts should be increased to address concerns and misconceptions about the European Union (EU) and its impact on Moldova, highlighting the benefits of EU membership.
- Efforts should be made to address some of the concerns around the EU, through a non-polarised political process, which deliberates over the benefits and drawbacks people perceive about the EU, and which promotes intergroup communication and understanding.

Problematic narratives are linked to serious threats to the social cohesion of Moldova. They lead to decreased *Support for Human Rights*, exacerbate relations between linguistic groups, and may increase vulnerability to political violence, especially among the youth.

Despite low levels of *Aggression* and *Readiness for Political Violence* in Moldova, the propagation of problematic narratives and general instability in the region may threaten social cohesion. Crucially, both pro-Russian and anti-Russian narratives have similar effects in increasing *Aggression* and *Readiness for Political Violence*. This highlights the need for caution in countering pro-Russian propaganda. In fact, resilience analysis revealed *Economic Security* and efficient and effective *Provision of Services* offer resilience against the effects of problematic narratives on *Aggression* and *Readiness for Political Violence*. Further, media consumption and the narratives the media propagate can have a negative impact on the *Support for Human Rights* and social cohesion in general.

- Stakeholders should address the problematic narratives surrounding Russia and the EU by ensuring balanced and fact-checked reporting.
- Government should ensure efficient and effective *Provision of Services* and stakeholders should work on strengthening *Economic Security*, as current analysis shows that these measures can mitigate the negative effects of narratives on Moldovan citizens' *Aggression* and *Readiness for Political Violence*.
- Caution should be exercised when countering pro-Russian propaganda to avoid inadvertently generating *Aggression*, anger, or even normalising political violence.
- Programs should be developed that aim to foster positive social relations and intergroup harmony. These could be paired with interventions to promote media literacy and critical thinking skills and to ensure the *Political Security* of various vulnerable groups.
- See also the SCORE report: *Strengthening the Bonds* – a report on the social dynamics in Moldovan society, for further tailored recommendations on building social relations between groups, available at app.scoreforpeace.org.

Media Consumption of Moldovan Citizens

Top Media Sources (TV, social media, Websites)

Figures 1 – 3 show the media landscape in Moldova, in terms of consumption for news and socio-political issues. Television¹⁰ is the most frequently consumed medium, with Prime TV, Moldova 1TV, and Pro TV being amongst the most popular sources of news, political and social issues. Facebook and YouTube are the two most popular social media platforms of news for Moldovans. Websites are less frequently used compared to TV channels, with Jurnal.md, Protv.md, Publika.md, Point.md and Stiri.md being the most popular¹¹. This data can be used to tailor communication strategies towards particular channels or sources which are more or less popular overall, or among certain demographic groups¹².

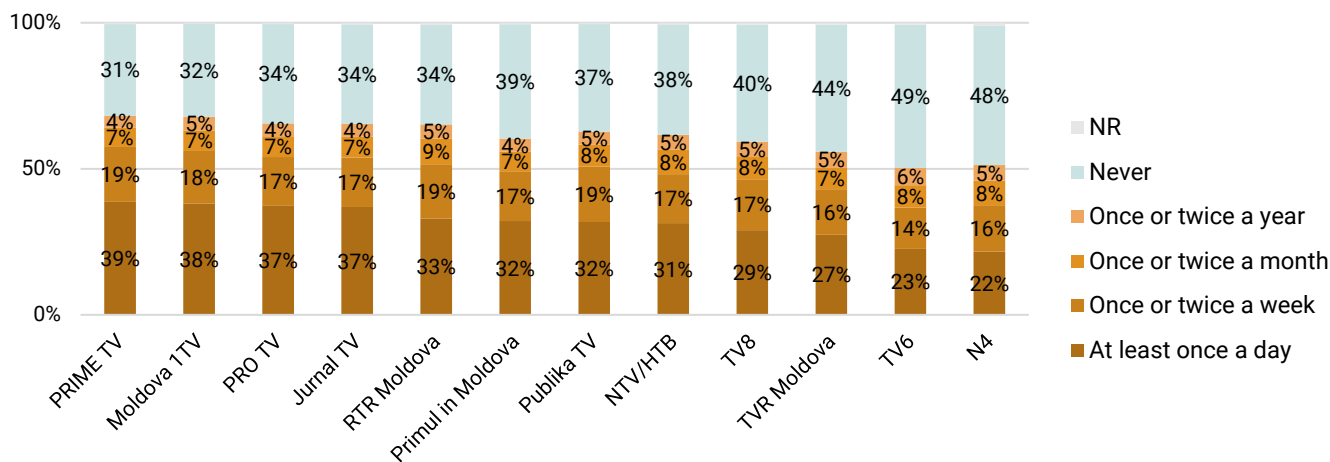


Figure 1: Percentage of TV Channels consumption

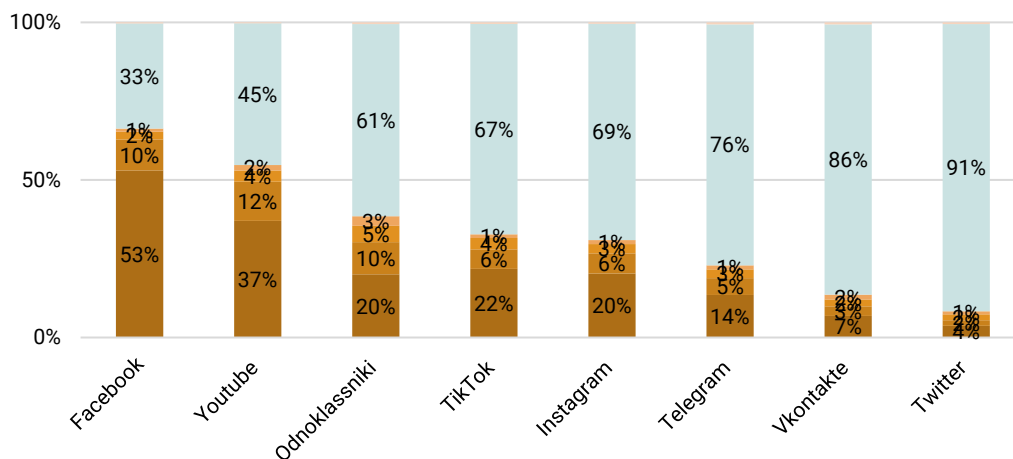


Figure 2: Percentage of Social Media consumption

¹⁰ The data was collected before the broadcast licenses of the following channels were suspended on December 16, 2022, during a state of emergency in Moldova: Primul in Moldova, RTR Moldova, Accent TV, NTV Moldova, TV6 and Orhei TV.

¹¹ Traditional media were a less popular source of news with only 15% using radio and less than 5% of the sample reading newspapers daily.

¹² For media consumption preferences by demographic groups, visit app.scoreforpeace.org/en/Moldova/datasets.

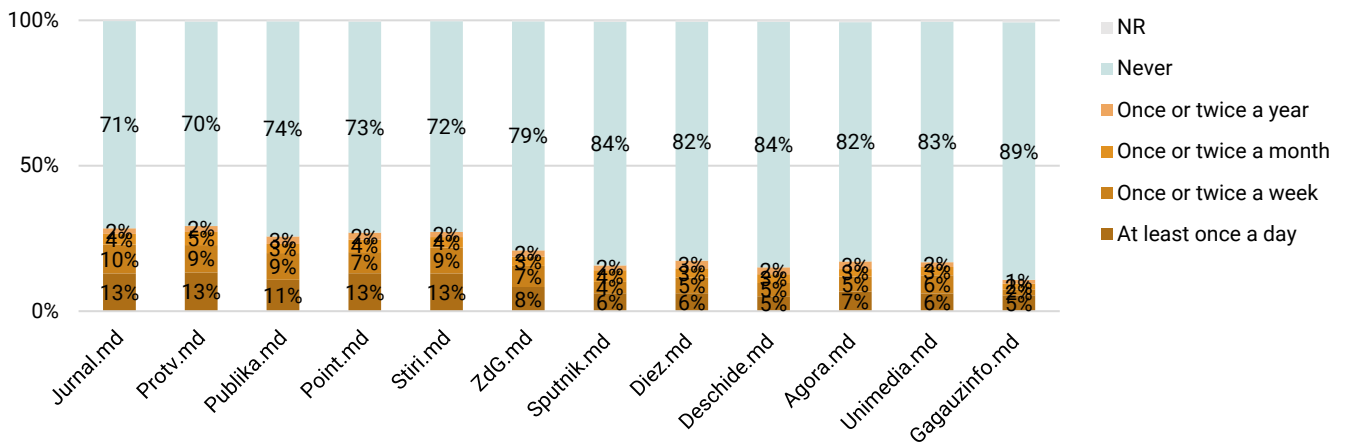


Figure 3: Percentage of online media (websites) consumption

Media Consumption of Youth

Figures 4 – 6 shows media consumption in the youth sample (18 to 35 years old) in Moldova. Compared to the representative sample (Figures 1– 3), youth tend to consume less TV and rely more on online news platforms and social media. Jurnal TV and PRO TV are the most popular TV channels among youth. Similar to the representative sample, Facebook and YouTube are the most widely used social media platforms. However, the younger generation tends to use Instagram and TikTok more frequently relative to the representative sample.

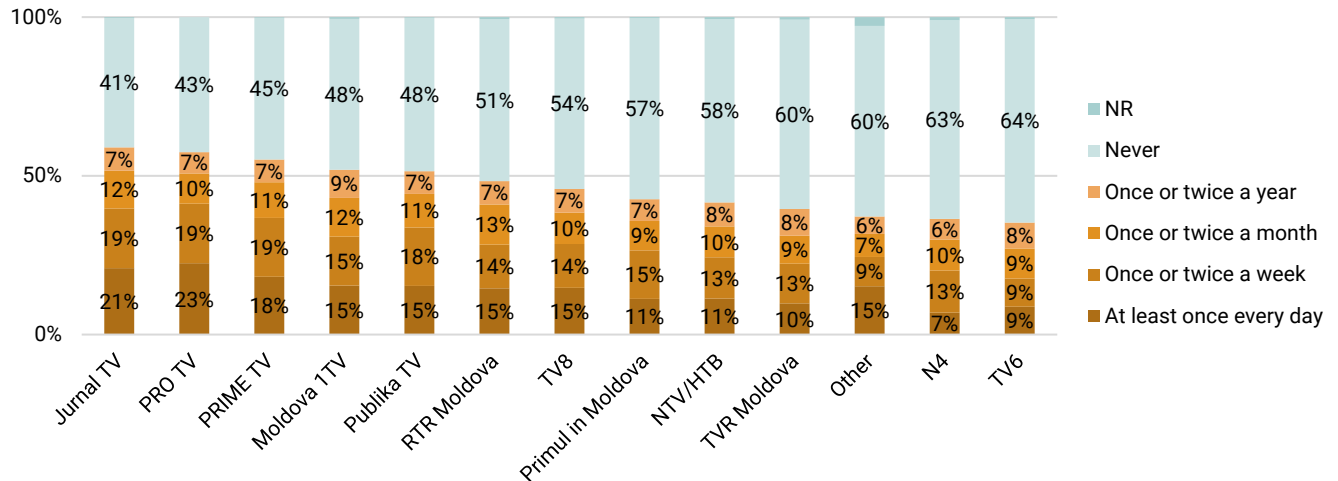


Figure 4: Percentage of TV channels consumption among Youth (Booster sample)

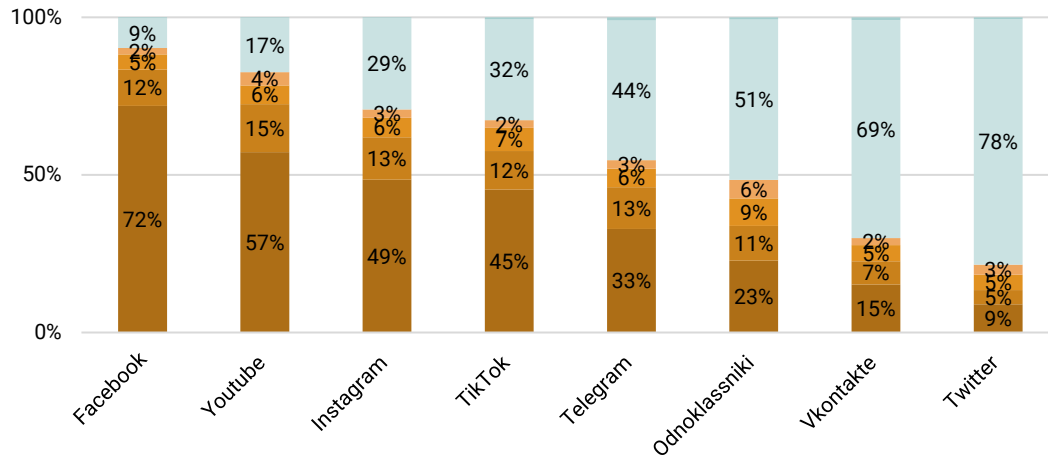


Figure 5: Percentage of Social Media consumption among Youth (Booster sample)

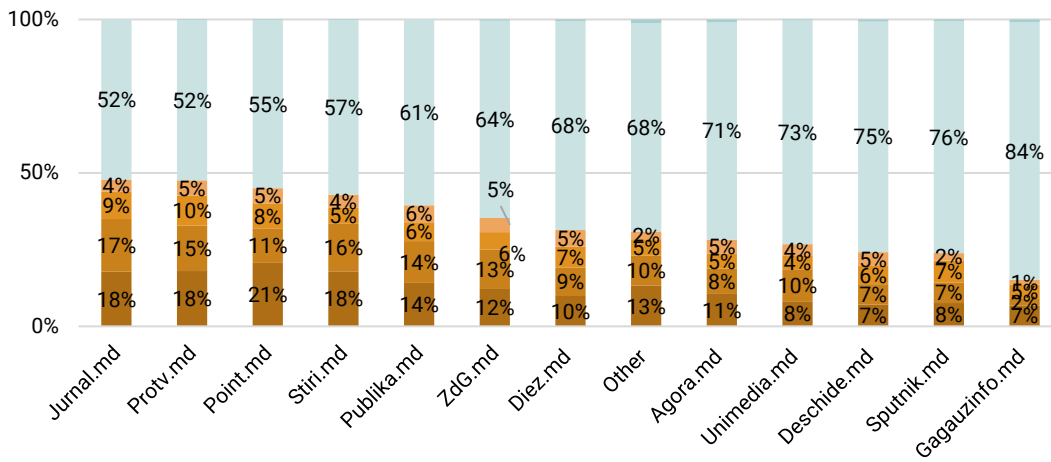


Figure 6: Percentage of Online media consumption among Youth (Booster sample)

Comparing the Right and Left Banks of the Nistru/Dniester River

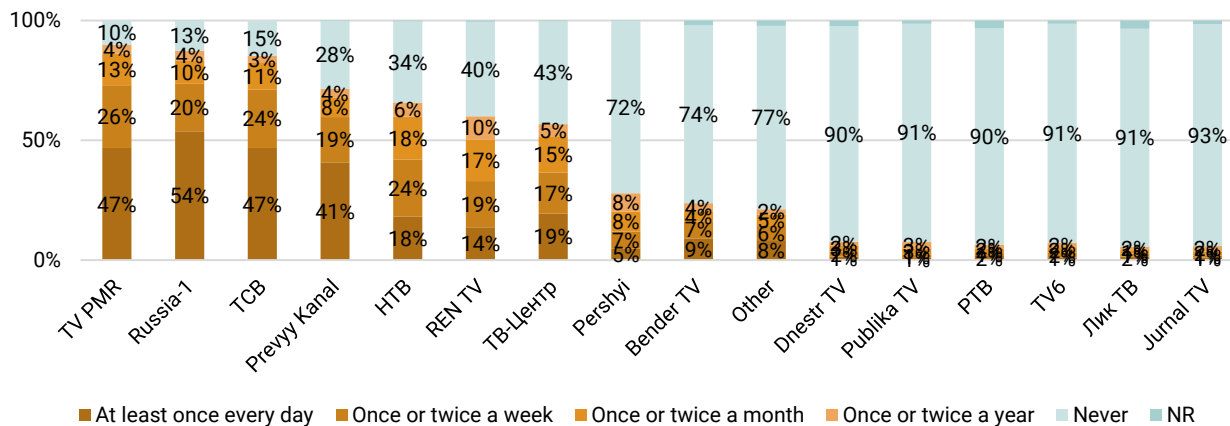


Figure 7: Percentage of TV channels consumption among Left Bank respondents.

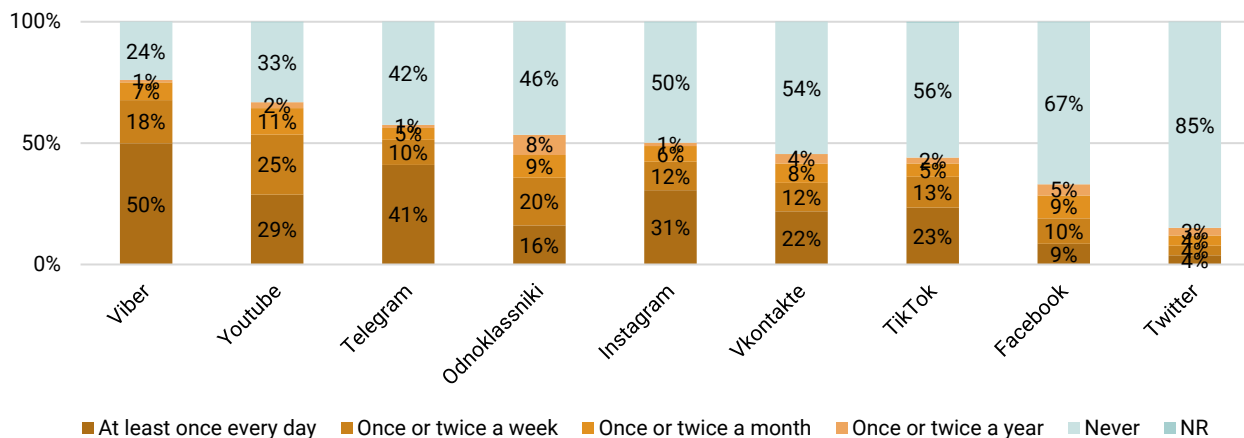


Figure 8: Percentage of Social Media consumption among Left Bank respondents.

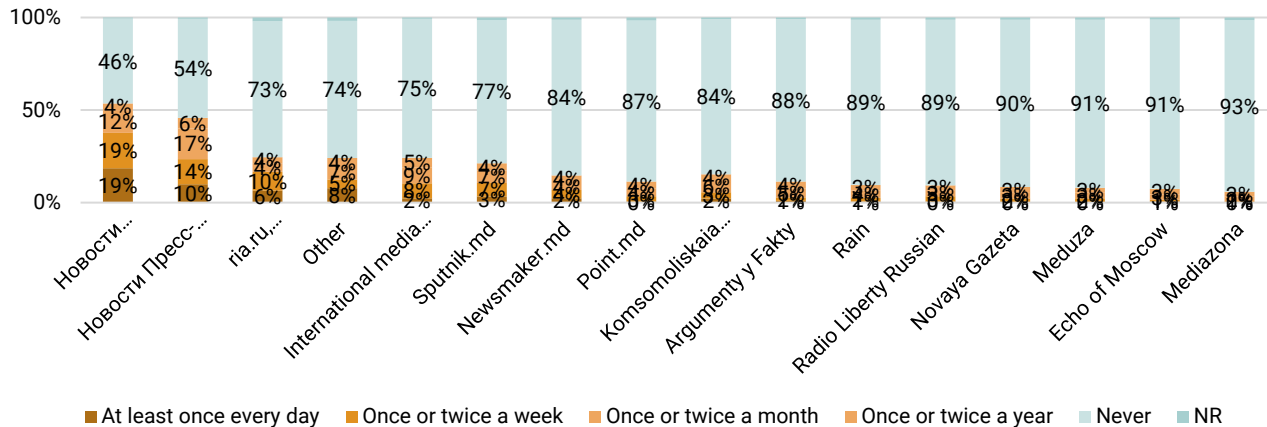


Figure 9: Percentage of Online Media consumption among Left Bank respondents.

Media Consumption of Russian Speaking Moldovans

Figures 10 – 12 show the media consumption of Russian speaking Moldovans in the representative sample¹³. RTR Moldova and NTV/HTB are the most frequently consumed channels. However, the level of consumption of these two TV channels is not significantly different between Bilinguals and/or Romanian speakers. Popular TV channels (Figure 1) are consumed significantly less by native Russian speakers compared to bilinguals and Romanian speaking Moldovans, including Pro TV¹⁴ (18% of Russian speaking Moldovans consume this channel at least once a week, 65% among Bilinguals, 68% among Romanian speaking Moldovans) and Jurnal TV (21% consume this channel at least once a week, 65% Bilinguals, 67% among Romanian speaking Moldovans)¹⁵. Russian speaking Moldovans generally use social media in a similar way and with similar frequency as the rest of the population (see also Figure 2).

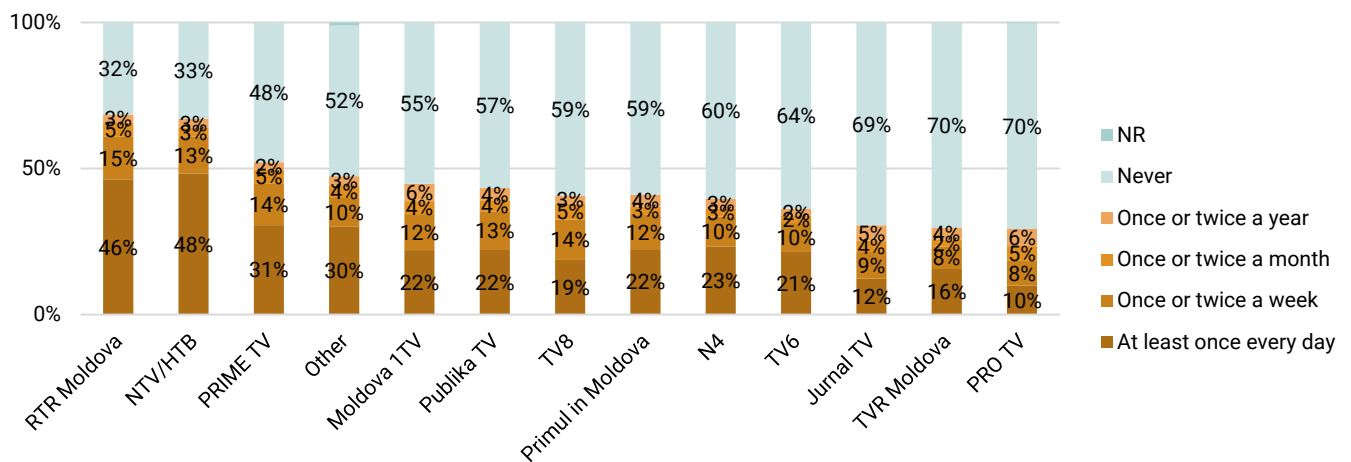


Figure 10: Percentage of TV channels consumption among native Russian speakers.

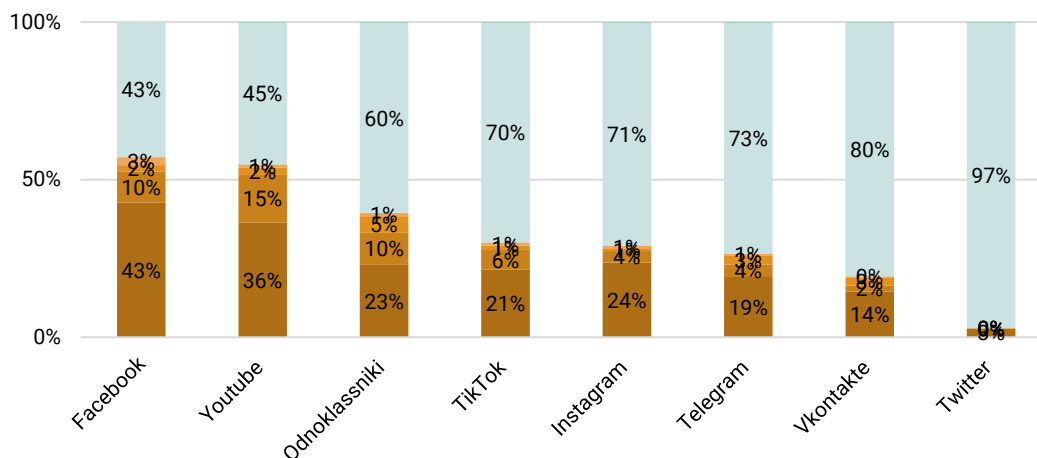


Figure 11: Percentage of Social Media use among native Russian speakers.

¹³ Participants who reported being native speakers of Russian, but not of Romanian are considered to be Russian speakers.

¹⁴ (weighted) ANOVA test: $F = 149.27, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.20$

¹⁵ (weighted) ANOVA test: $F = 144.93, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.20$

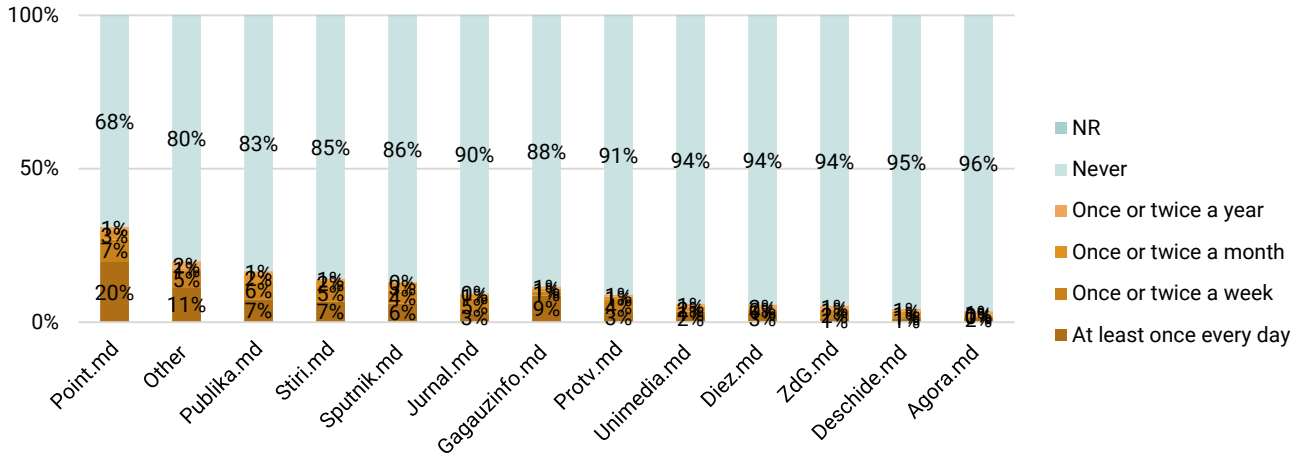


Figure 12: Percentage of Online media consumption among native Russian speakers

Reason for Media Choice

The main reason people choose which media sources to follow is convenience, followed by the accuracy of news and up-to-date information as the second and third reasons, respectively (Figure 13). Interestingly, bilinguals choose accuracy (30%) and timeliness of information (28%) as their top reasons for selecting media sources.¹⁶

Most important reason for selecting these sources

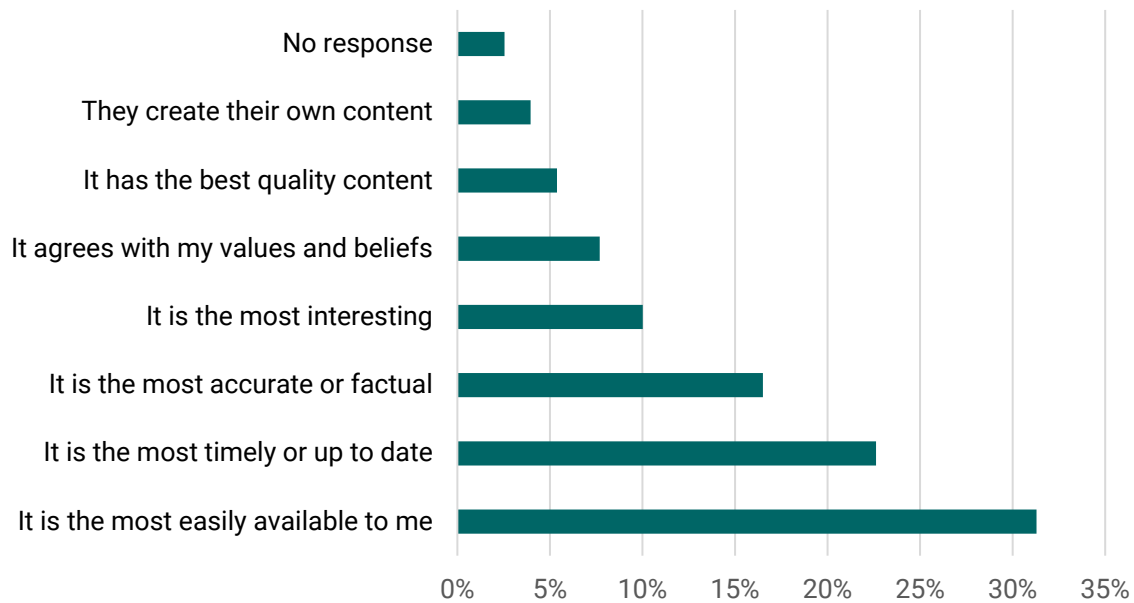


Figure 13 Reason for media choice, frequency of responses.

¹⁶ No statistically significant gender, age and urban/rural differences on reasons for media choice

Polarising Narratives

Media has the power to influence public opinion through the use of narratives that can resonate with pre-existing beliefs. When crafted effectively, narratives can be impactful in shaping the way individuals view certain issues or topics.¹⁷ This is particularly relevant in the case of the Republic of Moldova, given its complex geopolitical position, historical affiliations (such as its Soviet legacy), and linguistic diversity, which can make it especially susceptible to the proliferation of problematic narratives. Such narratives are often driven by vested interests and can ultimately threaten the country's ongoing democratic development.^{18,19,20} In this section we aimed to better understand the main polarising narratives propagated in the Republic of Moldova.

Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with a series of viewpoints and ideas about Russia, the war in Ukraine, the EU, and the role of these actors in relation to Moldova. The responses were then analyzed using a statistical algorithm to group specific narratives into main themes. Three distinct themes emerged, which are depicted in Figures 14 – 16. Theme 1 encompassed items portraying Russia as a protector and stabilizing force in the region (Figure 14). Theme 2 consisted of items depicting Russia as a threat and menace to Moldova (Figure 15). Finally, Theme 3 highlighted Euroscepticism, encompassing narratives that portrayed the EU as a threat to national identity and sovereignty of the country (Figure 16). Figure 17 shows items that did not significantly contribute to a specific theme.

The portrayal of Russia as a protector and stabilizing force in the region, which constitutes Theme 1, is often used as a legitimization strategy rooted in the country's Soviet legacy.^{21,22} In the representative sample, moderate to low endorsement was observed for the Pro-Russian narrative (19% – 35% with 'somewhat' and 'strong agreement'; Figure 14). For instance, 35% agreed that "Russia invaded Ukraine to protect people marginalized by Nazi sympathizers". Russian-speaking Moldovans showed the highest agreement at 57%, compared to 37% of bilinguals and 23% of Romanian-speaking Moldovans. Similarly, 31% agreed that "the Russian Federation is the guarantor of peace and stability in Moldova" (Russian-speaking Moldovans: 54%; Romanian-speaking Moldovans: 19%; Bilinguals: 35%). While Balti respondents demonstrated similar tendencies to the national sample, UTAG respondents demonstrated strong pro-Russian positions on these statements, with approximately 3 in 4 people agreeing with statements of this narrative. Such narratives are particularly alarming as they may polarise Moldovan society and lead Russian-speaking minorities and/or other vulnerable groups to extreme views.

¹⁷ Roselle L, Miskimmon A, O'loughlin B. Strategic narrative: A new means to understand soft power. *Media, war & conflict*. 2014 Apr;7(1):70-84.

¹⁸ Brusis, M. "The Politics of Legitimation in Post-Soviet Eurasia." In *Politics and Legitimacy in Post-Soviet Eurasia*, edited by Martin Brusis, Joachim Ahrens, and Martin S. Wessel, 2016, 1–17. London: Palgrave Macmillan

¹⁹ RSF. RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index: a new era of polarisation [Internet]. 2022. Available from: <https://rsf.org/en/2022-world-press-freedom-index-new-era-polarisation>

²⁰ Bennett WL, Livingston S. The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions. *European journal of communication*. 2018 Apr;33(2):122-39.

²¹ Kosienkowski M. The Russian World as a legitimization strategy outside Russia: the case of Gagauzia. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*. 2021 May 4;62(3):319-46.

²² This ideology proclaims the existence of an imagined transnational community of people living primarily in the post-Soviet area and identify with Russia in many ways (Salas Sanchez, 2022).



Figure 14: Narratives portraying Russia as the protector of the region.

In the representative sample, around 35% to 44% of respondents agreed with the narrative depicting Russia as a regional threat including statements like “Russian influence in Moldova has destroyed our country” and “Russia is a threat to peace in Moldova”. Among the UTAG respondents, only 8% endorsed the narrative depicting Russia as a regional threat, while approximately 15% of Balti respondents agreed with these statements. Nevertheless, there were no significant differences observed between age groups or language backgrounds, indicating that even Russian-speaking Moldovans recognize to some extent the destabilizing effects of the Russian Federation on their country and the region.

About 50% of participants in the representative sample showed Eurosceptic tendencies, with no significant age differences, but significant linguistic differences. Among Russian-speaking Moldovans, 71% agreed with the statement that the EU would endanger their national decision-making if Moldova joined, compared to 41% and 48% of Romanian-speaking Moldovans and bilingual speakers, respectively. UTAG respondents were even more Eurosceptic, with approximately 85% agreement on statements supporting this narrative. In contrast, Balti respondents held moderate positions, with only about one-third agreeing with Eurosceptic statements. The high levels of Euroscepticism observed in Moldova may be attributed to disinformation spread by Russian-affiliated media outlets²³. In the next section, we examine how different media outlets shape the propagation and endorsement of the polarising narratives identified in the Republic of Moldova

²³ Cravcenco-Zaharia L. The society-wide battle against disinformation in Moldova, 2022.

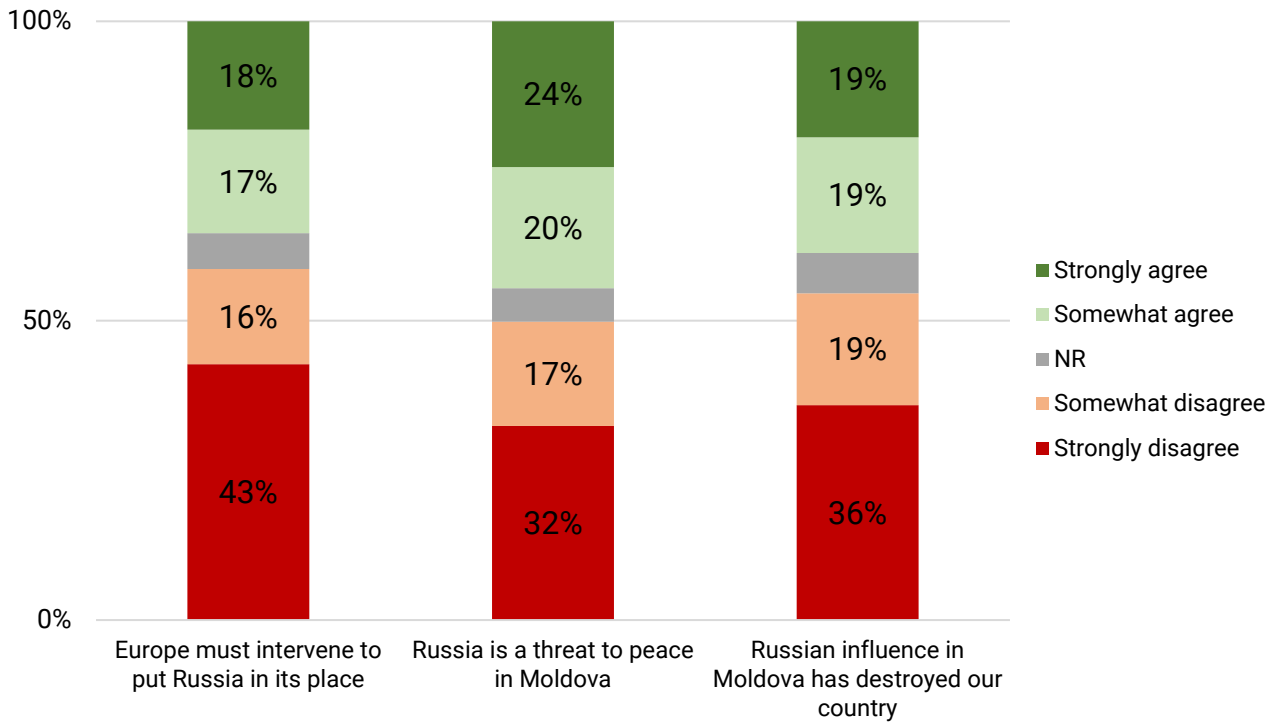


Figure 15: Narratives portraying Russia as a threat.

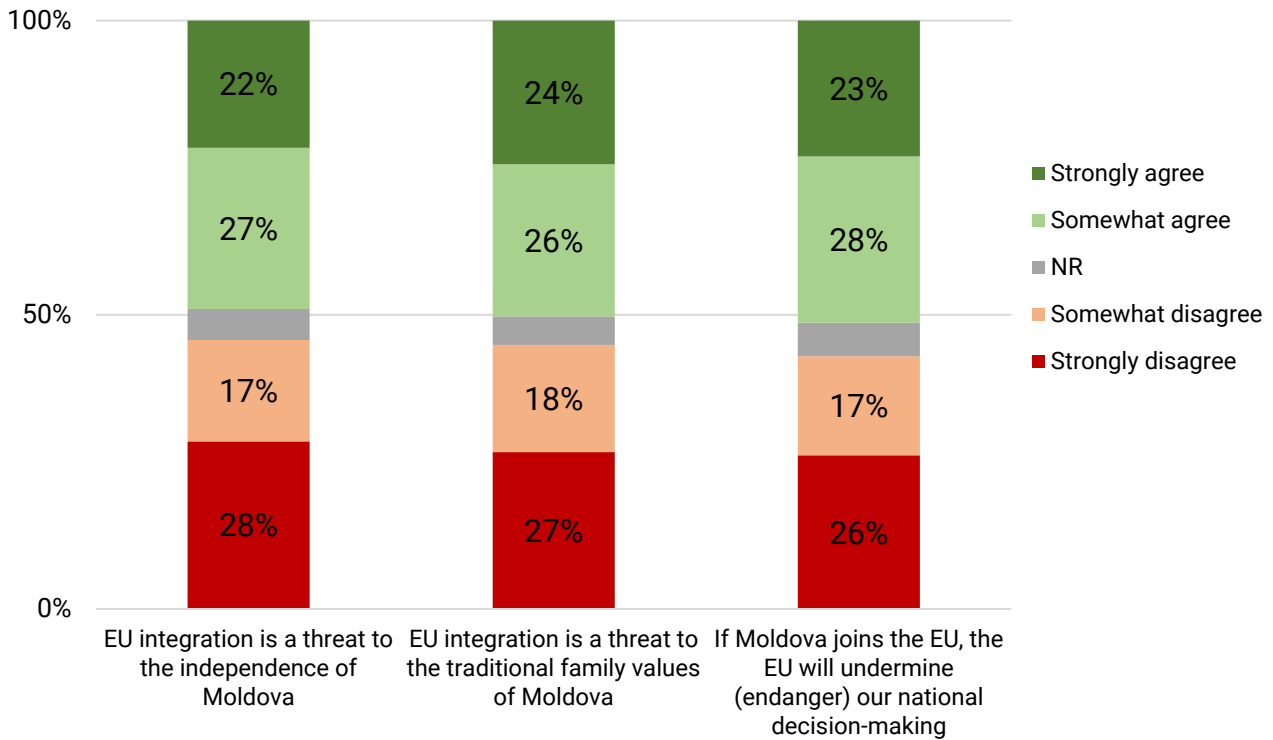


Figure 16: Narratives portraying the EU as a threat to national identity and sovereignty.

Around half of the respondents agreed that “NATO is a threat to peace in Moldova”, which is similar to the level of agreement for the statement “Russia is a threat to Moldova”. In fact, a strong majority of the Russian speaking Moldovans (64%) and Gagauzians (70%) think that NATO is a threat. Additionally, more than half of the representative sample agreed that “Zelensky should have been more accommodating to Russia”, with 77% of Russian-speakers, 76% of Balti respondents, and 83% of Gagauzians. Further, about 37% disagreed that “Russia is the aggressor in Ukraine”, with 25% of Russian-speakers and 10% of Gagauzians agreeing with this statement. Moreover, around 39% of respondents believed that “the regulations against Russian media are persecuting Russian-speaking minorities in Moldova” (see Figure 17). Feelings of persecution are especially prevalent among Russian-speaking Moldovans (60%) and Gagauzians (67%). Linguistic groups in Moldova and other groups with some form of identification with Russia, may be particularly vulnerable to feeling alienated. Such feelings of alienation could have negative implications for social cohesion in the long term, potentially leading to social fragmentation and tensions.

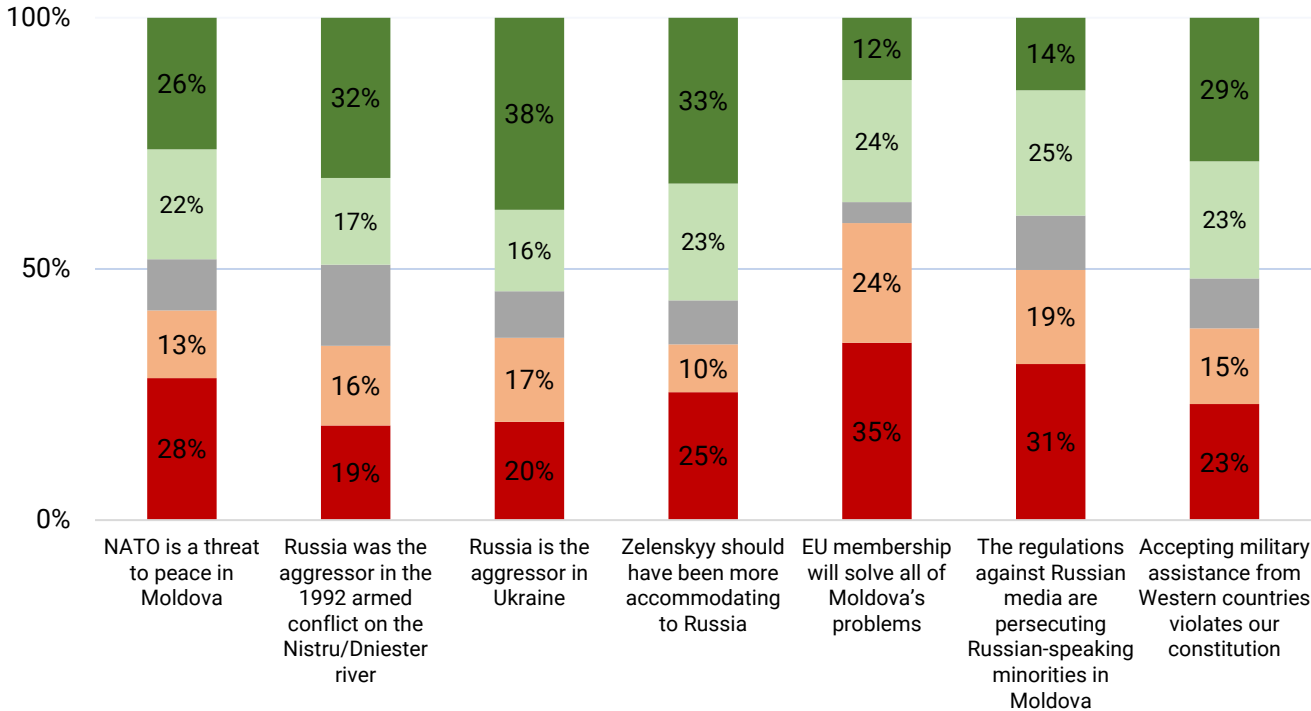


Figure 17: Other polarising narratives

Media Sources and Polarising Narratives

This section examines the impact of different media sources (Figure 18) on narratives regarding Russia's role as a stabilising force, Russia as a threat, and Euroscepticism. Results show that EU-leaning media have a negative effect on the endorsement of narratives portraying Russia as a stabilising force, while Russian-leaning media increase support for these narratives. Pro-EU channels positively influence the endorsement of the narrative that Russia poses a threat, while Russian-leaning channels owned by oligarchs decrease it. Russian-leaning channels positively impact Eurosceptic narratives. State-owned and oligarch-associated TV channels have a relatively weak impact on narratives, but when they do, they tend to influence them similarly to EU-leaning channels. Education and subjective poverty play a significant role, with more educated people more likely to endorse this narrative, while less affluent individuals were less likely to do so.

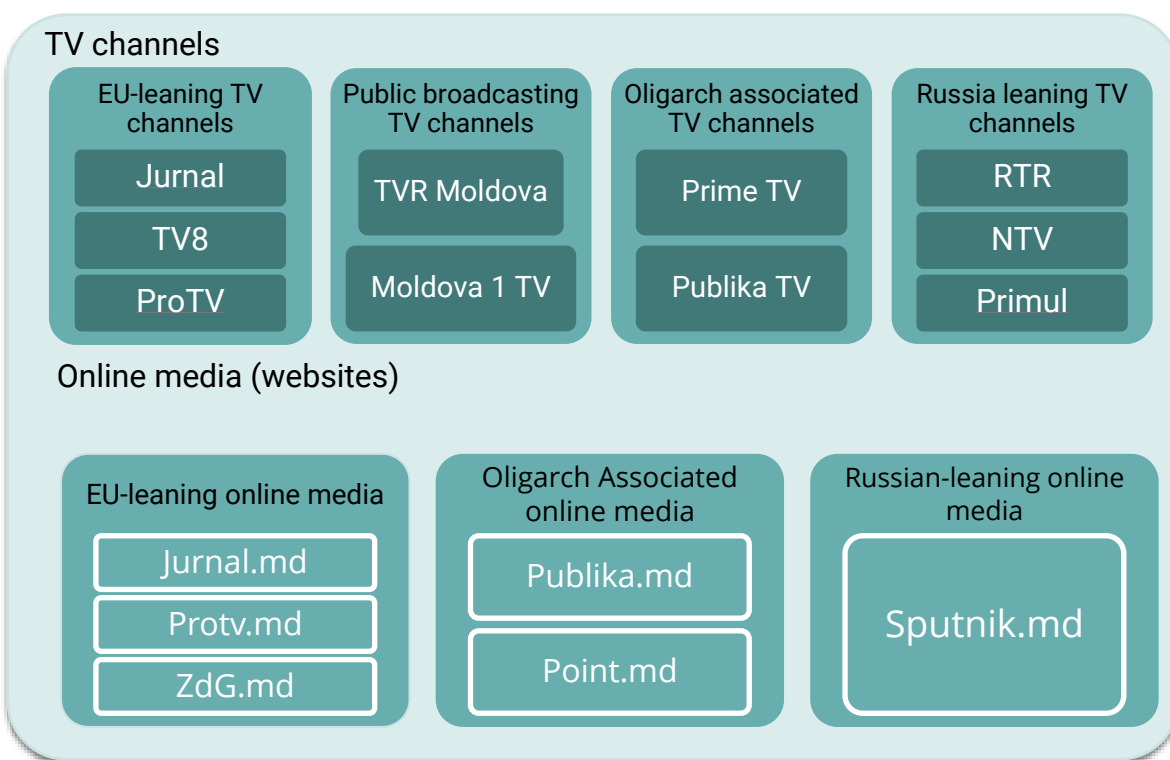


Figure 18: TV channels and Online media by editorial perspective. Media sources were categorised by type (TV channels, Websites) and the following editorial perspectives/ownership groups: 1) EU-leaning media, 2) Oligarch-associated, 3) Russian-leaning media²⁴, 4) State-owned (TV only)^{25,26}.

²⁴ Not all available channels were included in the various editorial perspectives. Only channels that had distinct editorial lines were selected to represent each category.

²⁵ Confirmatory factor analysis revealed a good fit of the proposed editorial perspective structure on the TV channels and online media shown in Figure X on, $\chi^2 = 694.308$, $p < .001$, CFI = .96, TLI = .94, SRMR = 0.06)

²⁶ BBC. Moldova media guide. 2022 retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17602346>

There are also differences among linguistic groups. For instance, further comparisons²⁷ revealed that Bilingual speakers were more likely to endorse Russia as a stabiliser narrative relative to Romanian speaking Moldovans²⁸, while Russian speaking Moldovans were more likely to support this narrative relative to both Bilingual²⁹ and Romanian speaking Moldovans³⁰. On Russia as a threat narrative, comparisons between the different linguistic groups revealed that both bilinguals and native Romanian speaking Moldovans were more likely to endorse this relative to native Russian speaking Moldovans. Comparisons between the different linguistic groups revealed that both bilinguals³¹ and native Romanian³² speakers were less likely to endorse Euroscepticism relative to native Russian speakers.³³ For a detailed analysis of how different media outlets impact different narratives, please refer to the table below. Separate analyses were conducted for youth as well³⁴. Policy writers should consult the table to identify which channels to target in countering problematic narratives region.

Table 1. Effects of consumption of different media on the different problematic narratives.

Predictors	Russia as the Stabilising Force		Russia as a Threat		Euroscepticism	
	Full Sample	Youth Booster	Full Sample	Youth Booster	Full Sample	Youth Booster
EU-leaning TV	-0.34	-0.24	0.4	0.32	-0.38	-0.26
Russian-leaning TV	0.4	0.20	-0.45	-0.31	0.29	-
Oligarch-associated TV	-0.11	-0.21	0.11	-	-0.09	-
State-owned TV	-0.09	-	-	-	-	-
EU-leaning Websites	-0.21	-0.25	0.29	0.36	-0.13	-
Russian-leaning Websites	0.18	0.19	-	-	-	-
Oligarch-associated Websites	-	-	-0.26	-0.18	-	-
Alternative social media platforms	0.12	0.20	-0.06	-0.12	-	-
Mainstream social media platforms	-0.08	-	0.06	-	-	-
Age	0.08	-	-	-	-	-
Education Level	-0.10	-	-	-	-0.11	-
Subjective Poverty	0.06	-	-0.06	-	0.1	-

Note. Models controlled also for Gender and Urbanity, which were not statistically significant across the different samples (*all* $p > .05$); Mainstream social media platforms: Facebook, YouTube, & Instagram; Alternative social media platforms: TikTok, Odnoklanniki, Telegram). Standardised beta coefficients shown.

Audience Segmentation

The questions that measured the level of consumption of various TV channels in the sections above were then aggregated into two indicators: one measuring the consumption level of channels with a pro-

²⁷ Post-hoc comparisons (Tukey) reveal whether there are systematic differences at the average predicted value of the dependent variable (in this case, Russia as the Protector) at different linguistic groups, while controlling for average effects of the other predictors in the model.

²⁸ Bilingual – Romanian speakers, estimate = .28, $p < .001$.

²⁹ Bilingual – Russian speakers, estimate = -.21, $p < .001$.

³⁰ Romanian – Russian speakers, estimate = -.50, $p < .001$.

³¹ Bilingual – Russian speakers on Russia as a threat model, estimate = -.36, $p < .001$.

³² Romanian – Russian speakers, estimate = -.43 $p < .001$.

³³ Following the significant effects of education and subjective poverty on the different narratives, the media literacy across these factors was examined. More educated respondents reported higher levels of media literacy relative to less educated respondents (Tertiary = 7.2, Secondary = 6.4, Primary = 5.6, $F = 48.33$, $ds = 0.34 - 0.70$, $p < .001$). No significant effects were observed on media literacy as a function of subjective poverty ($F < 1$).

³⁴ The models using the youth sample, show the same pattern of results except state-owned TV channels which were not significantly associated with any narrative.

EU stance, and the other measuring the consumption level of channels with a pro-Russia stance (Figure 18).

This categorisation approach is used to classify participants based on their consumption of television channels associated with EU-leaning or Russian-leaning editorial perspectives. Participants who watched at least one of the TV channels associated with either editorial perspective at least once or twice a month were considered frequent consumers of that leaning ("Only Russia-leaning TV" & "Only EU-leaning TV"). Participants who satisfied the criteria for at least one TV channel in each editorial perspective were categorized in the "Both EU & Russian leaning channels" group, indicating that they are frequently exposed to both perspectives. Participants who did not meet the criteria for any of the TV channels were allocated to the "No TV" group, indicating that they are not frequent consumers of either perspective. Overall, this approach helps to identify and classify individuals based on their exposure to different editorial perspectives in their television consumption.

These groups were categorized as follows: the "Both EU-leaning and Russia-leaning TV channels" group (55%), consisting of those who predominantly watch both categories of TV channels, the "No TV" group (25%), who typically do not watch any TV channels, the "Only Russia-leaning TV" group (10%), comprising individuals who mainly watch Russia-leaning channels, and the "Only EU-leaning TV" group (10%), made up of those who primarily watch EU-leaning channels.

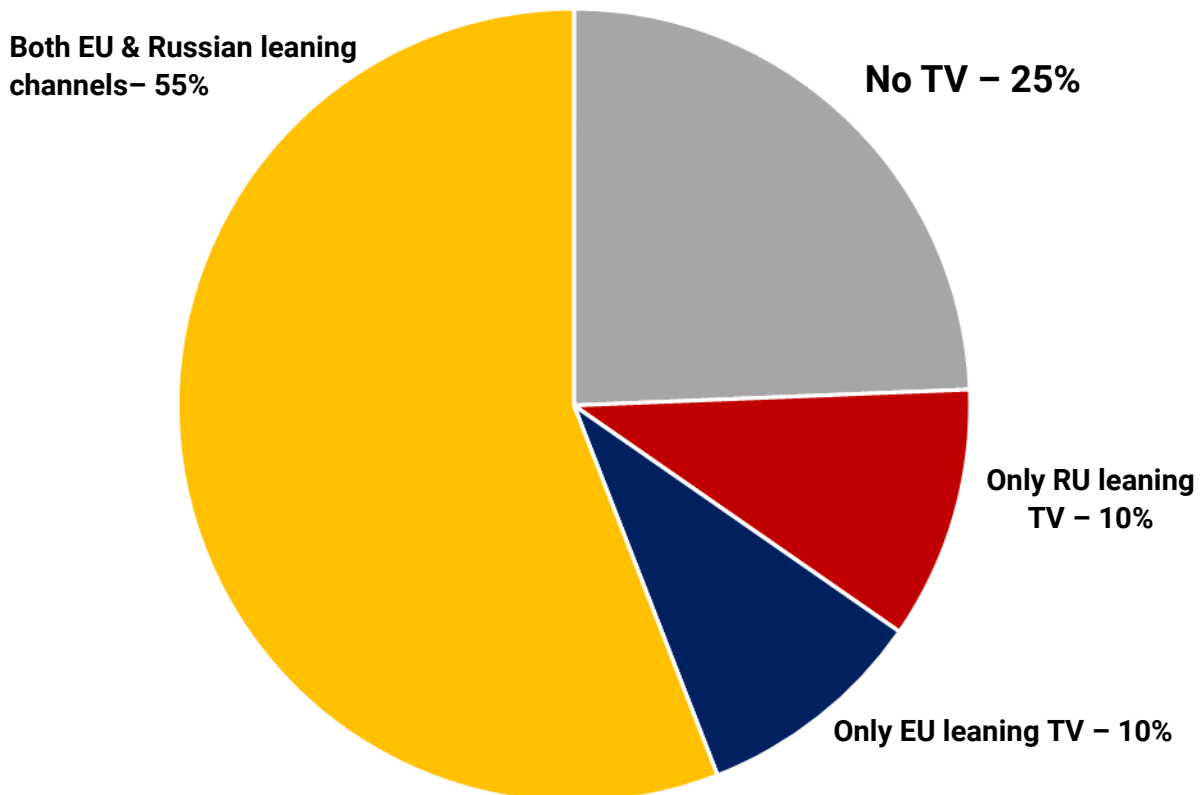


Figure 19 Results of cluster analysis which detected four distinct groups based on respondents' alliance and preference for political alignment with either Russia or the EU

Subsequently, additional analyses determined the notable variations between the four groups of citizens, by comparing their scores in various other social, psychological, interpersonal, political, and attitudinal measures included in the SCORE survey. These attributes and inclinations create the distinct characteristics of each group, as presented in the table below, and may serve as a basis for devising targeted interventions or initiatives for each group.

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of the different groups

	Full sample	No TV	Only RU leaning TV	Only EU leaning TV	Both EU & RU leaning TV
<i>average age</i>	51	44	54	46	55
<i>% who are men</i>	47%	45%	41%	42%	46%
<i>% who are women</i>	53%	55%	59%	58%	54%
<i>% who are rural</i>	55%	52%	52%	60%	58%
<i>% who are urban</i>	45%	48%	48%	40%	42%
<i>% primary education</i>	14%	19%	12%	13%	13%
<i>% secondary education</i>	58%	50%	61%	55%	61%
<i>% tertiary education</i>	28%	31%	27%	32%	26%
<i>% unemployed</i>	59%	57%	62%	54%	61%
<i>% employed</i>	41%	43%	38%	46%	39%
<i>% bilinguals</i>	15%	14%	5%	13%	18%
<i>% Romanian speakers</i>	56%	46%	18%	76%	64%
<i>% Russian speakers</i>	15%	18%	41%	2%	11%
<i>% other language</i>	14%	22%	36%	9%	7%

Based on the categorization of participants' news consumption habits into EU-leaning, Russian-leaning, both, or neither group, clear patterns emerge in terms of geopolitical leanings and future visions for Moldova. Those who exclusively consume Russian-leaning TV channels are more likely to be Eurosceptic, and view Russia as a protector rather than a threat. In contrast, those who exclusively consume EU-leaning TV channels tend to reject pro-Russian narratives, be less Eurosceptic, view Russia as a threat, and prefer a future closer to the EU. Participants who consume both types of channels are geopolitically similar to the EU-leaning group but hold more moderate positions, while those who do not watch TV fall closer to the Russian-leaning group but also hold moderate positions. Participants who exclusively consume Russian-leaning TV channels tend to support a future for Moldova that is closer to Russia and are more likely to support autonomous tendencies in UTA Gagauzian and Transnistrian independence or joining with Russia. In other words, these participants have a stronger preference for aligning with Russian interests and values, rather than European or Moldovan perspectives.

When it comes to civic behavior, the different clusters of participants show similar levels of support for human rights, inclusive civic identity, and prosocial civic attitudes. Participants in all groups have low feelings of marginalization and moderate levels of economic security and reported economic opportunities. However, there is low civic engagement across all groups. Additionally, participants in all groups show high levels of social tolerance, inclusive civic identity, and support of human rights and their universality. Table 3 highlights the civic attitudes that the groups differ.

Table 3 Key differences between the media groups on civic attitudes

	Full sample	No TV	Only RU leaning TV	Only EU leaning TV	Both EU & RU leaning TV
<i>Soviet Nostalgia</i>	5.7	5.6	8.6	4.0	5.5
<i>Strength of Moldovan Identity</i>	8.2	7.8	4.7	9.1	8.8
<i>Support for Linguistic Diversity</i>	7.3	7.2	8.7	5.7	7.4
<i>Support Dominance of Romanian Language</i>	4.4	4.2	2.2	5.7	4.8
<i>Support for Cultural Unity</i>	6.9	6.5	7.7	5.9	7.1
<i>Perceived EU Benefit</i>	6.1	5.5	3.1	7.3	6.7
<i>Support Reforms Relevant to EU Candidacy</i>	4.8	4.2	2.1	6.1	5.4
<i>Support for Reforms</i>	6.7	6.4	5.1	7.6	7.0
<i>Tolerance of Painful Reforms</i>	4.7	4.1	2.2	6.1	5.1
<i>Sense of Agency</i>	7.7	7.2	6.1	8.2	8.1
<i>Sense of Representation</i>	5.1	4.7	3.7	5.5	5.4

Note. In blue (highest) and yellow (lowest) show statistically significant contrasts.

Media outlets can play a vital role in promoting informed civic engagement and reducing potential biases. It is essential to provide diverse and balanced perspectives to promote critical thinking and media literacy. For the No TV group, media outlets may want to consider alternative ways of reaching this audience, such as through community outreach programs, to engage them in the democratic process. For the Only Russian-leaning TV group, media outlets can continue to promote the benefits of EU membership and the reforms that come with it and highlight the potential negative consequences of Soviet nostalgia and Euroscepticism. Further, for the Only EU leaning TV group, media outlets may want to focus on promoting the benefits of linguistic and cultural diversity. Promoting alternative sources of information and news can also help promote media literacy and critical thinking among all groups.

Can Media Consumption and Propagation of Narratives and Counter-Narratives Undermine Social Cohesion in Moldova?

This section aims to better understand the influence of TV channels and different narratives on critical aspects of social cohesion outcomes like Support of Human Rights, relations across linguistic groups, Aggression and Readiness for Political Violence. Specifically, three hypotheses were examined:

1. Media consumption and narratives increase levels of aggression and readiness for political violence. This hypothesis is tested on both the nationally representative sample (n=1991) and the youth sample (n= 633).
2. Media consumption and narratives decrease support for human rights. This hypothesis is tested on the nationally representative sample and the youth sample.
3. Media consumption and narratives may have a negative impact on the coexistence of different linguistic groups in Moldova by reducing openness (i.e., trust and positive feelings) between Romanian speakers and Russian speakers. This hypothesis is separately on Romanian (n=1116) and Russian speaker (n=297) subsamples of the national representative sample.

Models on Aggression and Readiness for Political Violence:

The *Aggression* scale measures an individual's tendency to resort to physical violence when provoked or when their rights are threatened. In both the youth (3.8) and nationally representative (2.8) samples levels of aggression are low. *Readiness for Political Violence* measures the extent to which one believes it is justified to use violence to achieve political aims. In both samples, readiness for political violence is extremely low (representative sample: 1.8; Youth sample:1.8). Despite low levels of aggression and readiness for political violence in Moldova, the propagation of problematic narratives and general instability in the region may threaten social cohesion. In this analysis, the impact of media consumption and exposure to different narratives on individuals' tendencies toward aggression and readiness for political violence is examined.

In both the youth and nationally representative samples, consumption of EU-leaning TV channels increases support of narratives that portray Russia as a threat and reduces Euroscepticism and support of narratives that portray Russia as a stabilising force in the region. Conversely, consumption of Russian-leaning TV channels Russia decreases support of narratives that portray Russia as a threat and increases support of narratives that portray Russia as a stabilising force in the region. Consumption of Russian-leaning TV channels also increases Euroscepticism, but the effect is less pronounced.³⁵

Further, the predictive analysis reveals that both narratives (of Russia as a threat or as a stabiliser) predicts increased aggression and political violence among citizens of Moldova. Effects on youth tend to be much stronger (compared to the representative sample), implying that youth are vulnerable to aggressive or politically violent tendencies when exposed to such polarising narratives. Euroscepticism, however, is not significantly associated with the two outcomes. Figure 15 shows the visualisation of the

³⁵ Both youth and national representative model controlled for gender, linguistic differences, education level, subjective poverty, and critical media literacy. Female respondents were less likely to exhibit aggressive tendencies (Youth: $\beta=-.23$; Full sample: $\beta=-.22$), while no gender differences were observed for readiness for political violence. Self-reported media literacy and fluency in the Russian language did not have a significant effect on the two outcomes. Less educated (Youth: $\beta=-.13$; Full sample: $\beta=-.13$) and less affluent respondents ($\beta=-.06$) were more likely to show increased aggression but not heightened readiness for political violence. On youth the model explained 13% (Full sample: 12%) of the variance of aggression and 10% (Full sample: 9%) of the variance of readiness for political violence.

pathways that start from consuming certain types of television, which build support for these narratives, and which finally have an impact on aggression and political violence³⁶.

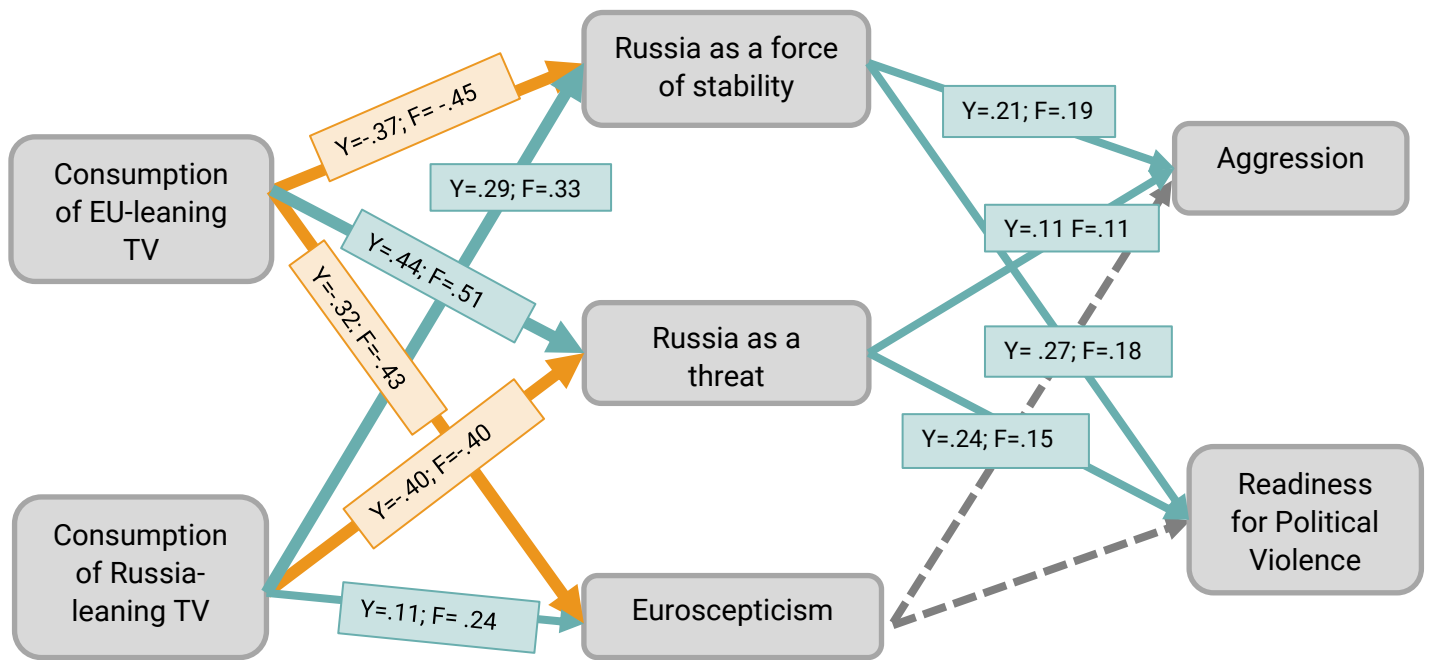


Figure 20 presents a schematic model depicting the pathways through which consumption of EU-leaning and Russian-leaning TV channels predict aggression and readiness for political violence. The model includes control variables such as gender, education level, subjective poverty, critical media literacy, and fluency in the Russian language. All coefficients presented in the figure are standardised. Y refers to the youth sample; and F refers to the full (nationally representative) sample.

The SCORE analysis highlights the importance of promoting media literacy and critical thinking skills, especially among youth, and the responsibility of policymakers and media organizations to ensure balanced and fact-checked reporting. The analysis indicates that both pro-Russian and anti-Russian narratives have similar effects in increasing aggression and readiness for political violence, emphasizing the need for caution in countering pro-Russian propaganda, so as not to inadvertently generate aggression, anger, or even the normalisation of political violence. Such measures can help individuals navigate the polarising media landscape and make informed decisions regarding Russia and the EU, promoting social cohesion and reducing the risk of violence.

³⁶ The mediation model suggests that consuming Russian-leaning TV increases aggressive tendencies and readiness for political violence by promoting the idea of Russia as a stabilizing force, while consuming EU-leaning TV increases aggression and readiness for political violence by portraying Russia as a threat in the region.
 Indirect effect of Russian-leaning TV consumption on aggression via Russia as the stabilising force narrative, estimate: Youth=0.15, 95%BCI [0.06, 0.27], β =.06; Full sample =0.14, 95%BCI [0.09, 0.19], β =.06.
 Indirect effect of Russian-leaning TV consumption on readiness for political violence via Russia as the stabilising force narrative, estimate Youth =0.16, 95%BCI [0.09, 0.25], β =.08, full sample =0.12, 95%BCI [0.08, 0.17], β =.06.
 Indirect effect of EU-leaning TV consumption on aggression via Russia as the threat narrative, estimate: Youth=0.12, 95%BCI [0.03, 0.22], β =.06; Full sample=0.11, 95%BCI [0.06, 0.17], β =.06.
 Indirect effect of EU-leaning TV consumption on political violence via Russia as the threat narrative, estimate: Youth =0.22, 95%BCI [0.12, 0.32], β =.11, Full sample =0.15, 95%BCI [0.08, 0.21], β =.08.

Taking into account the impact of the different problematic narratives as adversities that may exacerbate aggression and readiness for political violence, the SCORE also identified resilience and fragility factors that may be easier for policymakers to impact. Building resilience can help to mitigate aggression and political violence in the face of problematic narratives. Specifically, in this analysis, being resilient means being able to maintain low levels of aggression and avoid resorting to violent means for political ends despite being exposed problematic narratives. SCORE resilience analysis shows that *Economic Security*³⁷ and *Provision of Services*³⁸ considerably contribute to increased resilience against the effects of problematic narratives. On the other hand, feelings of *Marginalisation*³⁹ appear to render people more fragile to problematic narratives thereby increasing the risk for aggression and political violence. Any resilience-building strategy must integrate these factors into interventions to insulate the society and vulnerable groups against violence.

Models on Undermining Support for Human Rights:

The second hypothesis examined the impact of media consumption and narratives on *Support for Human Rights*⁴⁰. *Support for Human Rights* was high in both the youth (7.4) and nationally representative (7.4) samples. A high level of *Support for Human Rights* is considered to be a key for social cohesion in Moldova. It was tested on both youth and nationally representative samples^{41,42}. The support of narratives that either present Russia as a threat or a stabilising force have negative effects on *Support for Human Rights*. Euroscepticism does not appear to be associated with this outcome. Neither EU-leaning media nor Russian-leaning media have a direct impact on the support for human rights. Nonetheless, both types of media have an indirect impact on *Support for Human Rights*, through the narratives they propagate. Specifically, consumption of Russian-leaning TV channels appears to present Russia as a stabilising force in the region, which leads to a decrease in *Support for Human Rights*⁴³. Consumption of EU-leaning TV channels present Russia as a threat to stability, which in turn, decreases people's *Support for Human Rights*⁴⁴. These findings demonstrate that media consumption and the narratives they propagate can have a negative impact on *Support for Human Rights* and social cohesion in general. It is important to

³⁷ The extent to which respondents feel confident that they have a stable, basic income, and whether their household income could cover additional costs such as higher education.

³⁸ The average extent to which respondents report that a range of services (basic schooling, vocational education, higher education, public healthcare, child protection, communal services, road networks, infrastructure, law and order) are provided very effectively, as experienced in their daily life.

³⁹ The extent to which respondents have felt discriminated against because of certain social characteristics, such as income, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, age, political opinions, language.

⁴⁰ To gauge support for human rights, participants were asked to rate how essential an array of individual claims and priorities are for a well-functioning and cohesive society. The statements included demanding equal pay for equal work for women, having freedom to practice and teach any religion, having the right to counsel in front of the law regardless of income, ethnicity, religion, or language, having the freedom to express sexual orientation, having paid holidays for all workers, and having freedom of assembly.

⁴¹ The associations between media consumption, different narratives, and support for those narratives are consistent with the previous model (Figure 15) and therefore, will not be reiterated or further discussed

⁴² Both youth and national representative model controlled for gender, linguistic differences, education level, subjective poverty, and critical media literacy. No gender differences in the support for human rights were found in either the youth or the full sample. Self-reported media literacy and fluency has a positive effect on the support for human rights (Youth: $\beta=.20$; Full sample: $\beta=.27$). Education, subjective poverty, and fluency in the Russian language did not have a significant effect on the support for human rights. The model explained 20% in the youth sample and 18% in the full sample of the variance of the belief in human rights.

⁴³ Negative indirect effect of Russian-leaning TV consumption on the support for human rights via Russia as the stabilising force narrative, estimate Youth $=-0.14$, 95%BCI $[-0.21, -0.08]$, $\beta=-.10$, full sample $=-0.10$, 95%BCI $[-0.13, -0.07]$, $\beta=-.08$.

⁴⁴ Negative indirect effect of EU-leaning TV consumption on the support for human rights via Russia as a threat, estimate: Youth $=-0.11$, 95%BCI $[-0.17, -0.05]$, $\beta=-.08$, full sample $=-0.13$, 95%BCI $[-0.17, -0.10]$, $\beta=-.11$.

recognise, however, that the problem is not with media consumption per se, but rather with the narratives being endorsed and disseminated. As above, both positive and negative narratives about Russia have an approximately equal impact on decreasing levels of support for human rights, implying that polarisation is troubling regardless of which direction it is in.

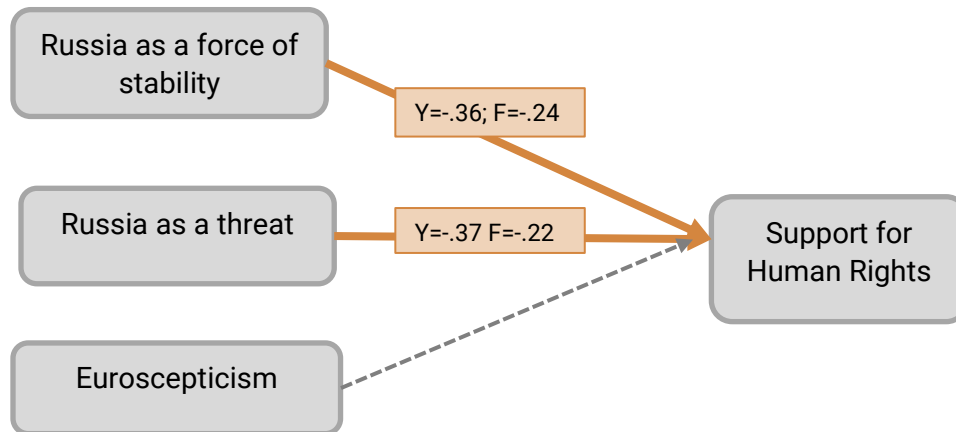


Figure 21 Depiction of the effects of the narratives on belief in human rights. The model includes control variables such as gender, education level, subjective poverty, critical media literacy, and fluency in the Russian language. All coefficients presented in the figure are standardised. Y refers to the youth sample; and F refers to the full (nationally representative) sample

Models on Language

The third hypothesis examined the impact of media consumption and narratives on the *Openness*⁴⁵ (i.e., the extent of trust and positive feelings) Romanian-speaking and Russian-speaking Moldovans feel towards each other. Firstly, for both Romanian and Russian speaking Moldovans, the associations between media consumption, different narratives, and support for those narratives are consistent with the previous model (Figure 20) and therefore, will not be reiterated or further discussed⁴⁶. For Romanian-speaking Moldovans, narratives portraying Russia as a threat as well as narratives on Euroscepticism decreases *Openness* towards Russian-speaking Moldovans. For Russian-speaking Moldovans, Eurosceptic narratives decrease *Openness* towards Romanian-speaking Moldovans. In fact, for Romanian speaking Moldovans, further analyses show that consumption of EU-leaning TV channels present Russia as a threat to stability, which decreases *Openness* towards Russian-speaking Moldovans^{47,48}. Thus, it can be said that these narratives, but Euroscepticism in particular, has a detrimental effect on social relations within the country between the linguistic groups. Efforts should be made to address some of the concerns around the EU, through a non-polarised political process which

⁴⁵ The SCORE study measured the level of trust, positive feelings, and contact between different social, linguistic, and political groups in Moldova. More detailed information on these findings can be found in the Strengthening the Bonds report, which discusses social dynamics in Moldovan society.

⁴⁶ The model explained 10% and 12% in the Romanian-speaking and Russian-speaking subsamples, respectively.

⁴⁷ Negative indirect effect of EU-leaning TV channels on openness towards Russian-speaking Moldovans, among Romanian speaking Moldovans, estimate: $b=-0.15$ 95%BCI[-0.20, -0.10], $\beta=-.10$

⁴⁸ Although Euroscepticism had a negative effect on openness towards Russian-speaking Moldovans, there were no indirect effects of TV consumption on openness via this narrative.

deliberates over the pros and cons of the EU. Otherwise, bumps along the road to EU accession might be leveraged by Eurosceptic media to drive a wedge between the linguistic groups of Moldova.

The SCORE also identified resilience and fragility factors that may bolster *Support for Human Rights* and subsequently make human rights easier for policymakers to impact. In this analysis, being resilient means being able to maintain *Support for Human Rights* and *Openness* to linguistic outgroups despite being exposed problematic narratives. SCORE resilience analysis shows that *Critical Thinking and Media Literacy*⁴⁹ and *Political Security*⁵⁰ contribute to increased resilience against the effects of problematic narratives. On the other hand, perceived social tensions⁵¹ between different groups and negative attitudes towards women appear to render people more fragile to problematic narratives thereby increasing the risk for intergroup tensions. Any resilience-building strategy must integrate these factors into interventions to insulate the society and vulnerable groups against social fragmentation.

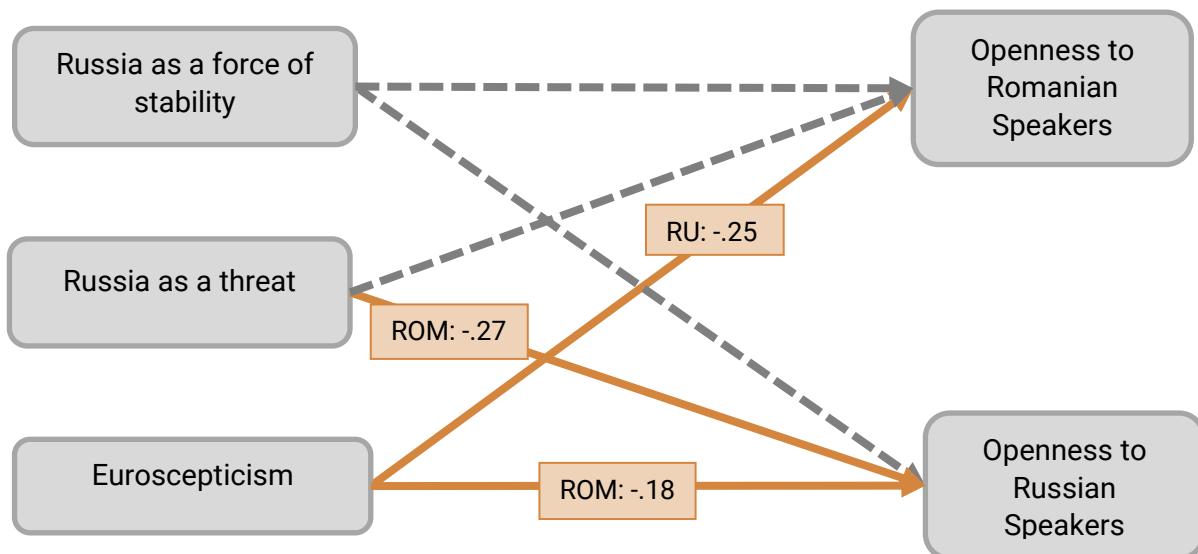


Figure 22 Depiction of the effects of the narratives on openness towards linguistic outgroups. The model includes control variables such as gender, education level, subjective poverty, and critical media literacy. All coefficients are standardised. ROM refers to Romanian-speaking Moldovans, and RU to Russian-speaking Moldovans. The effects on each group were tested on subsamples of the nationally representative sample.

Media sources, in their pursuit of influence, often resort to sensationalism and exaggeration to capture attention and shape public opinion. This tendency to rely on problematic narratives that are heavily one-sided and sensationalised has been shown to contribute to polarisation and the erosion of social cohesion. Such narratives tend to reinforce existing biases, while ignoring alternative perspectives. Such media coverage can thus be particularly damaging, as it exacerbates tensions and undermine efforts to

⁴⁹ The extent to which respondents are open to changing perspective on the basis of new evidence, use more than one source of information to corroborate facts, and understand that media is created using tools to affect one’s attention and understanding of the message, as well as often portraying different communities based on stereotypes.

⁵⁰ The average extent to which respondents feel that they can freely participate in religious practices important to them, that the education system respects the values they believe in, that they can freely express their political views, and that they are free to get together with like-minded people and publicly express their collective views.

⁵¹

foster dialogue and understanding among different groups. Taken together, the findings indicate that media narratives can exacerbate polarisation and undermine social cohesion by increasing aggression and the willingness to engage in political violence among both young people and the general population. Further they can have a powerful influence to undermine support for human rights and the harmonious coexistence between the different linguistic groups. The findings indicate that narratives that portray Russian in a positive light (as a protector) and a negative light (as a threat), have an equally damaging effect on most of these outcomes.

Therefore, it is important for media outlets to strive for balance, accuracy, and inclusivity in their reporting, be aware of the potential consequences of the narratives they promote and the impact these can have on social dynamics. Media organizations should thus prioritise balanced and fact-checked reporting on political issues and strive to promote critical thinking and media literacy skills among their audiences. Actors should take care when using particularly polarising narratives in their quest to counter existing problematic narratives, as this might lead to unforeseen negative social effects. Instead, countering of polarising narratives should be measured and responsible. Further, relevant regulatory bodies should monitor and regulate media content to ensure that it does not undermine social cohesion and human rights. By doing so, we can ensure that media plays a positive role in promoting social harmony and human rights.

Supplementary Analyses 1: Media Language and Origin

Participants were asked to specify how often they engage with media content in either Romanian or Russian languages, and whether it originates from Russia, Moldova, or Romania. In Figures S1 – S4 show the distribution of responses for different categories including, Gender, Age, Region, and self-reported language fluency.

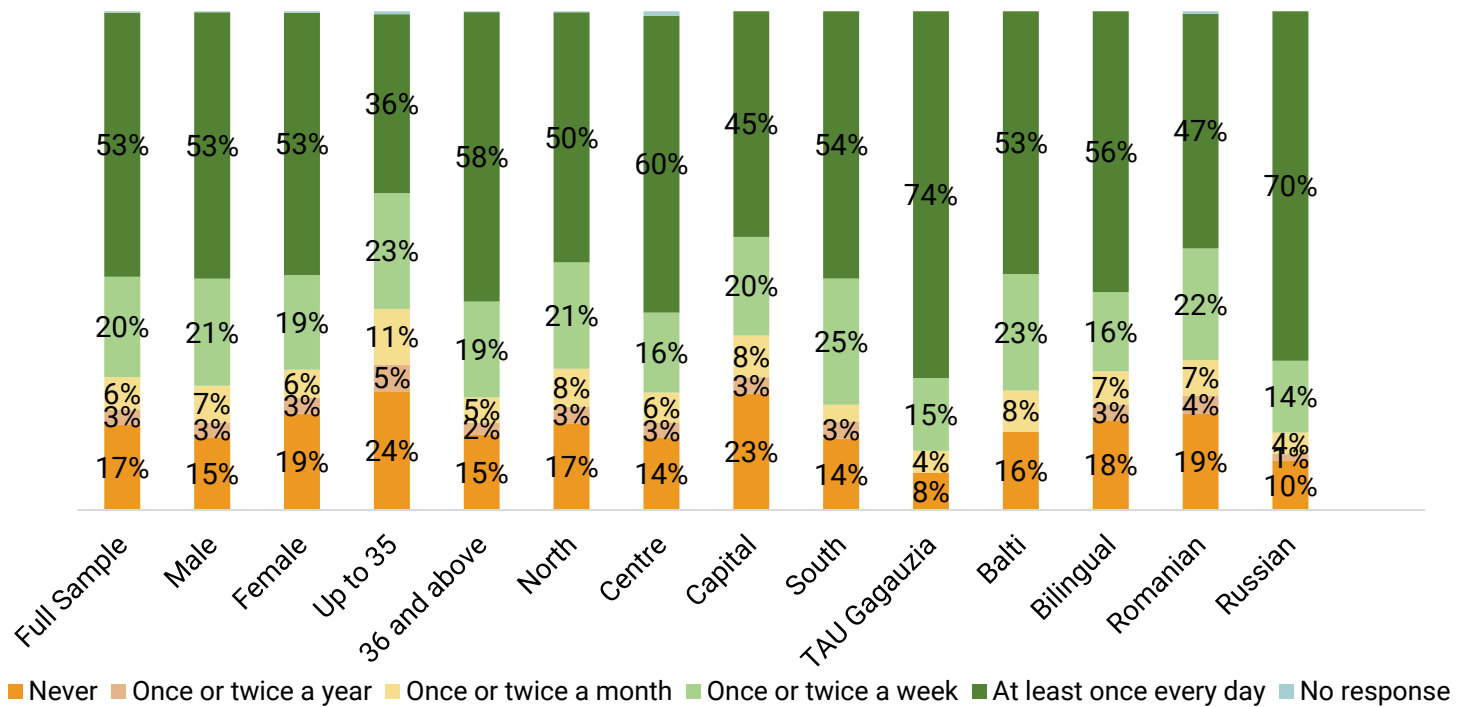


Figure 14 Media in Russian produced in Moldova

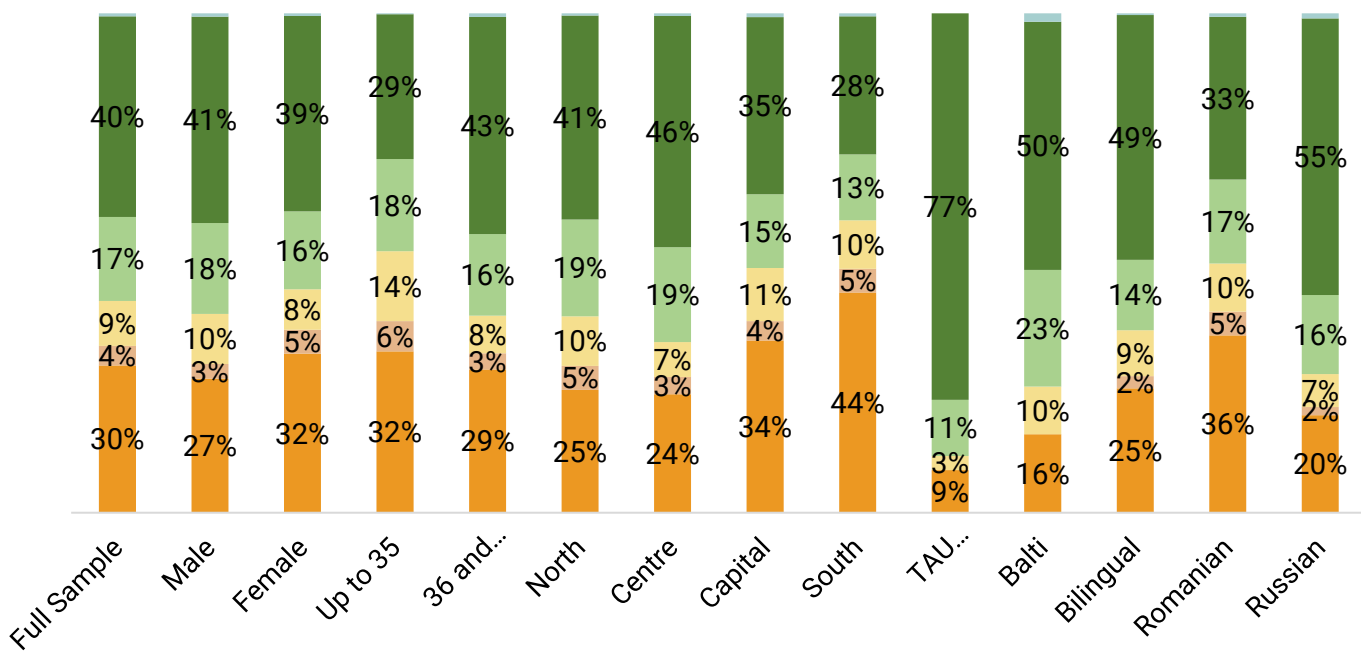


Figure 15 Media in Russian produced in Russia

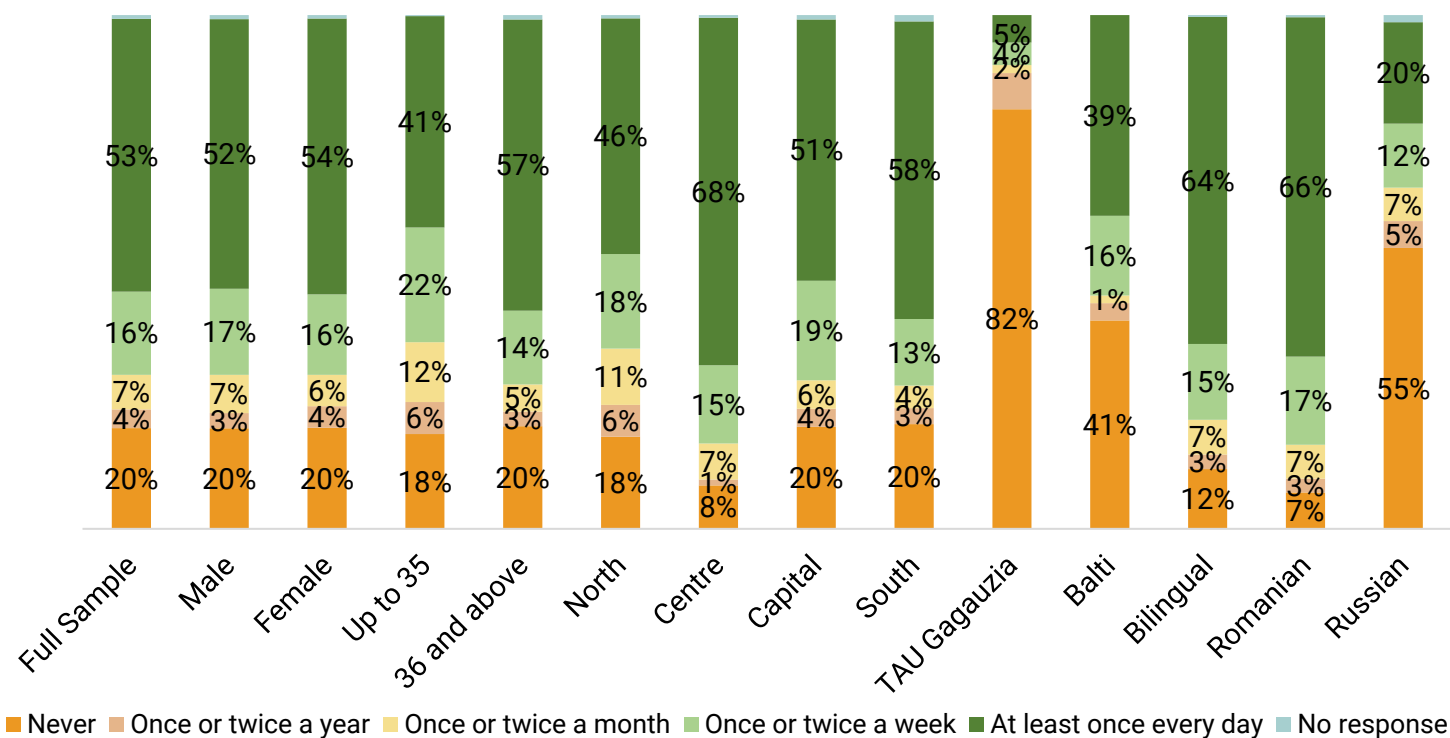


Figure 16 Media in Romanian produced in Moldova

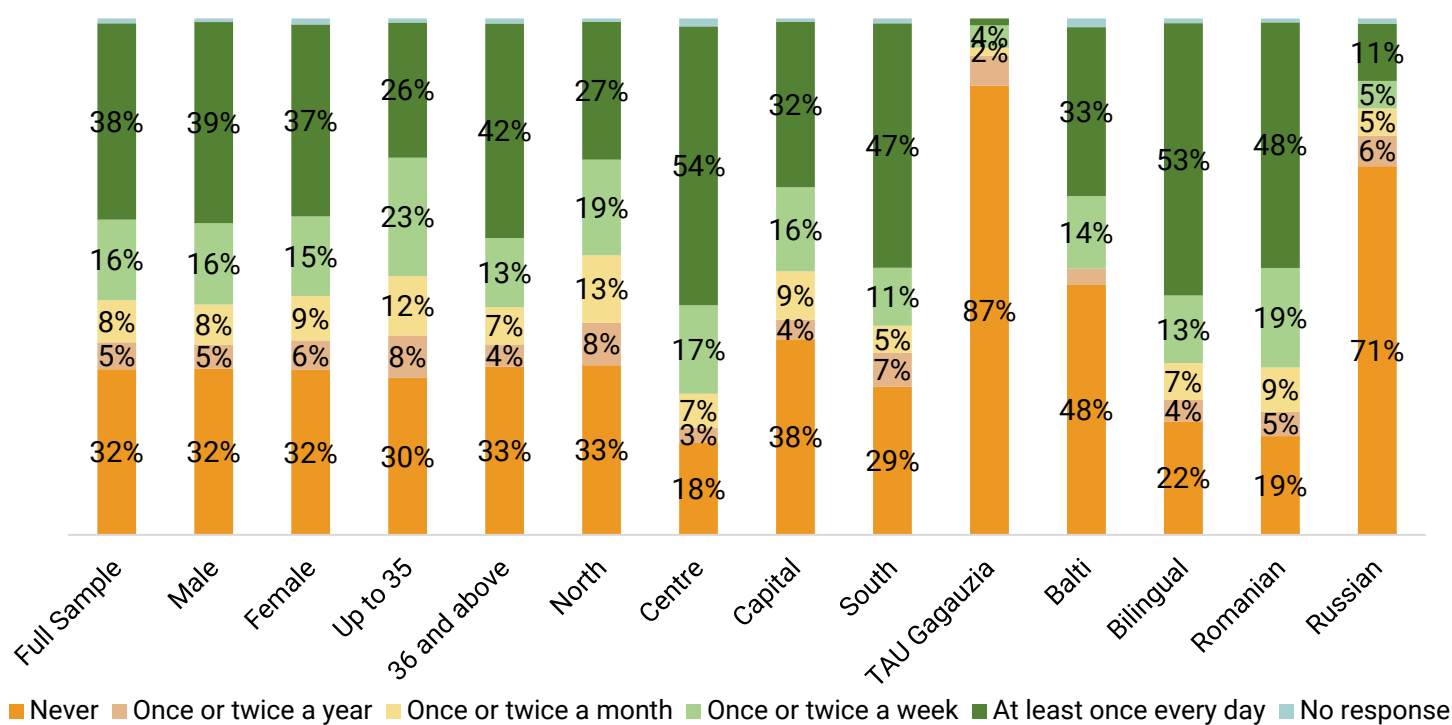


Figure S4 Media in Romanian produced in Romania

Table S1 Correlations between Media Language by origin and Key Indicators

Indicator	Media in Russian produced in Moldova	Media in Russian produced in Moldova	Media in Russian produced in Moldova	Media in Russian produced in Moldova
Narratives Russia as the Protector	.15	.23	-.36	-.35
Narratives Russia as a threat	-.19	-.25	.32	.33
Narratives Euroscepticism- Europe as a Threat	.15	.26	-.26	-.27
Aggression	-.07	–	-.19	-.19
Readiness for Political Violence	-.08	-.05	-.05	-.07
Support for Human Rights	–	-.06	.10	.07
Geopolitical Alignment with Russia	.20	.28	-.33	-.34
Geopolitical Alignment with EU	-.14	-.26	.37	.37

Supplementary Analyses 2: Top Channels and Websites

	North	Centre	Capital	South	TAU Gagauzia	Balti	Left Bank	Under 35	Romanian-speakers	Russian-speakers
	Moldova 1TV	PRO TV	PRO TV	PRIME TV	NTV/HTB	NTV/HTB	Russia-1	PRO TV	PRO TV	NTV/HTB
Top 3 TV Channels	PRIME TV	Jurnal TV	Jurnal TV	Moldova 1TV	RTR Moldova	RTR Moldova	TV PMR	Jurnal TV	Jurnal TV	RTR Moldova
	RTR Moldova	Moldova 1TV	PRIME TV	Jurnal TV	Other	PRIME TV	TCB	PRIME TV	PRIME TV	PRIME TV
	Jurnal.md	Jurnal.md	ZdG.md	Protv.md	Other	ZdG.md	Novosti PMR	Stiri.md	Jurnal.md	Point.md
Top 3 Online Sources	Protv.md	Protv.md	Jurnal.md	Stiri.md	Gagauzinfo.md	Publika.md	MVD PMR.org	Jurnal.md	Protv.md	Publika.md
	Publika.md	Publika.md	Point.md	Diez.md	ZdG.md	Point.md	Sputnik.md	Protv.md	Stiri.md	Stiri.md