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Public Opinion, Mass Media, and Foreign Policy of the Republic of Moldova: Between the Two Realms

Alla Rosca

Abstract: *This paper examines public opinion among Moldovans regarding their country's foreign policy and the role the mass media play in its formation. A logistic regression analysis indicates that trust in the Russian media that are present in Moldova strongly correlates with foreign policy opinion and trust in foreign leaders. Media consumption did not correlate significantly with any foreign policy decisions. In addition, the findings show a strong correlation between political preference and foreign policy opinion. The overall results support the Almond-Lippmann consensus that public opinion is volatile and does not have structure or coherence.*

Keywords: public opinion, mass media, foreign policy, Republic of Moldova, Russia

Introduction

The mutually affecting issues of public opinion and foreign policy are setting new research agendas. In the ongoing debate about public opinion, mass media, and foreign policy, there is no agreement on how the public comes to hold views on foreign policy and whether those opinions influence or should determine it. Most of the analyses were developed in the United States and resulted in the *Almond-Lippmann consensus*, which stipulates that public opinion is incoherent and inconsistent and does not determine the national leadership's foreign policies.¹ It generated continued academic debate to confirm or contradict this concept.

In the aftermath of the Vietnam War new research emerged and both the factors affecting public opinion attitudes and their influence on foreign policy were re-evaluated, and as result, public opinion as a focus of the research was integrated in different areas of study.² Public opinion research evolved also to include topics such as citizens' opinions and mass media in

1 Ole Holsti and James M. Rosenau, "Vietnam, Consensus, and the Belief Systems of American Leaders," *World Politics*, 32 (1979): 1–56.

2 Jon Hurwitz, "How are foreign policy attitudes structured? A Hierarchical Model," *The American Political Science Review*, 81, no. 4 (1987): 1099–120.

democratic societies, the differences between leaders' and citizens' information levels, and the public's approval of the use of force and support for wars.³ Notable attempts were made by researchers to elaborate a comprehensive public opinion model that integrates it into foreign policymaking, but no one approach has emerged to dominate the field.⁴

Most studies specifically analyzed public opinion and its influence on American foreign policy in the context of a democratic culture characterized by a market economy, the separation of powers in the state, and freedom of the press. Still lacking is research on the topic in other societies, such as those ruled by authoritarian leaders, with their strong centralized powers and control over mass media. Following the Soviet Union's dissolution into fifteen states, it became clear that their foreign policy should also be examined, in tandem with their extant public opinion. Public opinion in these newly established sovereign states that are struggling to reform their economy and implement democratic reform have so far frequently been ignored by the international scholarly community, with rare exceptions of studies of the Baltic States and Russia Federation.

This article addresses this gap and analyzes the relationship between public opinion, mass media, and foreign policy in the Republic of Moldova. The Moldovan case is relevant for several reasons. First, even after 30 years of independence, it is still a country in transition, attempting to make its way as a democratic society. Its political divisions and the struggle between its Soviet totalitarian past and democratic reforms make Moldova a distinctive case study of the relationship between public opinion, mass media, and foreign policy. Second, situated in the "near abroad" zone of special interest to the Russian Federation, bordering the European Union (EU), with cultural ties to Romania, and its former economic dependence on the Soviet Union, Moldova adopted a dual foreign policy, oscillating between the West (European Union) and East (Commonwealth of Independent Countries).⁵ Since establishing its independence, Moldova's "multi-vector" policy was unable to manage the ongoing ethnic and political conflicts, which have significantly complicated the creation of Moldova's sovereignty and its national identity. The separatist conflicts in Transnistria and Gagauzia, the ethnic division exhibited over

3 Matthew Baum and Tim Groeling, *War Stories: The Causes and Consequences of Public Views on War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

4 Douglas Foyle, "Public Opinion, Foreign Policy, and the Media: Toward an Integrative Theory," in *Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and the Media*, eds. Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 658–75.

5 Elena Gnedina, "Multi-Vector' Foreign Policies in Europe: Balancing, Bandwagoning or Bargaining?," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 67, no. 7 (2015): 1007–29.

the naming of the language of the titular nation—Moldovan or Romanian—Russia’s economic pressures and manipulation of gas prices, and the struggles faced by Moldova’s economy are just a few major political milestones that the country has encountered since independence. The linguistic, ethnic, and ideological disagreements led to a divided society, with half of the population expressing pro-European and the other half pro-Russian sentiments. Third, Moldova is an understudied country, particularly regarding the relationship between public opinion, mass media and foreign policy.

This study takes into consideration the particularity of Moldova’s media environment, marked by the presence of foreign media outlets, specifically Russian TV, radio, newspapers, and news agencies, which are promoting Kremlin’s interests. Russian broadcasters and publishers manage to maintain a high-profile presence in Moldova by entering in partnerships with Moldovan media outlets, which re-distribute their products. Our study will address this reality by separately analyzing Moldovan and Russian media.⁶

Mass media in Moldova are ranked as “partly free,” their independence has not improved in recent years, partly attributable to issues of public access to information and quality of content that caused a decline of press freedom and sustainability.⁷ Continuing declines in the Moldova media sector’s financial health, oligarchic control, and politicized regulation make it more difficult for mass media to play the role of WatchDog over governmental structures and provide unbiased, impartial information.

Conceptual Framework

Shortly after World War II, American researchers examined public support or rejection of Washington’s internationalist policies, ultimately leading to the conceptualization of the “Almond-Lippman consensus,” which remained a dominant notion until the 1970s. It posited that public opinion is volatile, does not have coherence or structure, and has little to no impact on foreign policy.⁸ By the 1990s, an expansion in data on public attitudes and an advancement in methodologies generated the second wave of research in the field, bringing about a rethinking of public attitudes

6 The term Russian media in this article will be used to mean the multitude of mass media produced in Russia and re-distributed by Moldovan media outlets.

7 Moldova. Europe & Eurasia. Media Sustainability Index, *USID* (2019): 177–97, <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europ-e-eurasia-2019-full.pdf>, accessed 20 May 2021.

8 Gabriel Almond, “Public Opinion and National Security,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 20, (1956): 371–8; Walter Lippmann, *Essays in the Public Philosophy* (Boston: Little Brown, 1955).

and their relationship to and roles in foreign policy.⁹ Consequently, a revisionist view of a public that is reasonable, although not completely informed, replaced the first two above-mentioned elements of the “Almond-Lippman consensus.”¹⁰ Adding to the mix of considerations, Eugene Wittkopf demonstrated the connections between partisanship, policy preferences and core beliefs; Jon Hurwitz and Mark A. Peffley characterized public attitudes from the perspective of the public’s general core values; and Ole Holsti compared the public’s attitude to the attitude of elites.¹¹ The third component of “Almond-Lippmann’s consensus” has generated the most attention in the newer research orientations and also less agreement. Thus, although some scholars argue that public opinion has only a limited role in foreign policy formulation, others’ quantitative analyses suggest that shifts in public opinion precede changes in defense spending, for example, votes in Congress, and presidential decisions on how to use force.¹²

The third wave of research on public opinion led scholars to consider how a range of conditional factors affected public opinion’s influence, although no leading approach has emerged. Thomas Risse-Kappen analyzed a range of conditional variables, including domestic structures; Douglas Foyle examined presidential attitudes toward public opinion; Thomas Knecht and Brandice Canes-Wrone evaluated stages of decision making and presidential popularity.¹³ As a much wider range of scholars in

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- 9 Ole Holsti, “Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond-Lippmann Consensus Mershon Series: Research Programs and Debates,” *International Studies Quarterly*, 36, no. 4 (1992): 439–66.
 - 10 Benjamin Page, Robert Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans’ Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Daniel Drezner, “The Realist Tradition in American Public Opinion,” *Perspectives on Politics*, 6, no. 1 (2008): 51–70.
 - 11 Eugene Wittkopf, *Faces of Internationalism: Public Opinion and Foreign Policy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990); Jon Hurwitz, and Mark A. Peffley, “How are Foreign Policy Attitudes Structured? A Hierarchical Model,” *American Political Science Review*, 81, no. 4 (1987): 1099–129; Ole Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2004).
 - 12 Lawrence Jacobs, and Benjamin Page, “Who Influences US Foreign Policy?,” *American Political Science Review*, 99, no. 1 (2005): 107–23; Thomas Hartley, Bruce Russett. “Public Opinion and the Common Defense: Who Governs Military Spending in the United States?,” *American Political Science Review*, 86, (1992): 361–87; James Meernik and Elizabeth Oldmixon “The President, the Senate, and the Costs of Internationalism,” *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 4, no. 2 (2008): 187–206; James Patrick, John Oneal, “The Influence of Domestic and International Politics on the President’s Use of Force,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 35, no. 2 (1991): 307–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002791035002008>.
 - 13 Thomas Risse-Kappen, “Ideas do not float freely: transnational coalitions, domestic structures, and the end of the cold war,” *International Organization*, 48, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 185–214; Douglas Foyle, *Counting the Public in. Presidents, Public*

the U.S. became interested in public opinion, they analyzed a number of other purported variables, including age, gender, race, religion, social class, and education on public opinion formation.¹⁴ Furthermore, researchers from other countries also incorporated these factors into their research when analyzing their societies, and socioeconomic and demographic variables proved valuable in studying public opinion and its formation.¹⁵

Additionally, researchers focused on public opinion included other factors, such as respondents' belief systems and trust.¹⁶ The most common explanatory variables in forming public opinion on U.S. foreign policy found in the North American literature, generally supported by survey data, are ideological orientation and political party membership.¹⁷ However, when political affiliation is used as a variable in other countries with a large number of political parties, such as Brazil, it turned out not to have the same significant influence.¹⁸

In the context of the Vietnam War, for the first time, American scholarship identified cooperative and militant internationalism as being two main vectors of American public opinion on foreign policy. Cooperative internationalism is focused on achieving common goals through collaborative and non-military actions, as well as being concerned about other countries and international issues.¹⁹ In contrast, militant internationalism supports the use of military force to achieve foreign policy objectives or simply as a self-defence strategy.²⁰ Militant internationalism is explained from the perception of American foreign policy up to 1992, and associated with the necessity to protect American interests vis-a-vis the

Opinion, and Foreign Policy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Thomas Knecht, *Paying Attention to Foreign Affairs. How Public Opinion Affects Presidential Decision Making* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011); Brandice Canes-Wrone, *Who Leads Whom?: Presidents, Policy and the Public* (University of Chicago Press, 2005).

- 14 David Fite, Mark Genest, Clyde Wilcox, "Gender Differences in Foreign Policy Attitudes: A Longitudinal Analysis," *American Politics Quarterly*, 18, no. 4 (1990): 492–513.
- 15 Lise Togeby, "The Gender Gap in Foreign Policy Attitudes," *Journal of Peace Research*, 31, no. 4 (1994): 375–92.
- 16 Benjamin Page, Marshal Bouton, *The Foreign Policy Discontent. What Americans Want from our Leaders but Do Not Get* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
- 17 Holsti, "Public Opinion and Foreign Policy."
- 18 Ana Paula, Borges Pinho, "Brazil's global aspirations and the public: an assessment on perspectives, drivers, and consistency," *Mural Internacional*, 9, no. 2 (2018): 163–74.
- 19 Eugene Wittkopf, "The structure of foreign policy attitudes: An alternative view," *Social Science Quarterly*, 62, no.1 (1981): 108–23.
- 20 Jon Hurwitz, Mark Peffley, "How are foreign policy attitudes structured? A hierarchical model," *American Political Science Review*, 81, no. 4 (1987): 1099–120.

USSR.²¹ And when studying the foreign policy attitudes of a country such as Moldova, once part of the Soviet Union, the literature that mainly focuses on the U.S. perspective should be tailored to address the small state that has no global foreign policy ambitions.

The media's role in helping create and link public opinion and foreign policy is one of the key elements in American literature on the subject and one that is studied as a concomitant factor.²² The complex relationship between public opinion, the media, elites and events that shape public attitudes is studied in particular regarding America's use of force and in relation to wars. For example, Adam J. Berinsky examines public opinion, coupled with a complex picture of the interaction between media, elites, and events on the ground, while Matthew Bauman and Tim Groeling emphasize the role media play in providing information to the public.²³ There is no consensus on the media's importance in shaping public opinion, but there is general agreement that public support is determined by interaction among elites and mass media as source of information. There is also general agreement that mass media and elites are important mediators between events in the real world and public support for foreign policy, and that foreign events do not translate directly into public support. The above-mentioned scholars do not embrace nor reject the *Almond-Lippmann consensus*, but they underlined the need for additional research in this area.

Increasing interest in studying public opinion led to further examination of the mass media's influence on foreign policy agendas in other Western democratic countries.²⁴ While some researchers confirmed the "Almond-Lippman consensus," others rejected it.²⁵ Most comparative research was conducted in *liberal democracies*, where there is a clear separation of powers, citizens have full civil rights and freedom of the press.²⁶

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- 21 Richard Herrmann, "American Perceptions of Soviet Foreign Policy: Reconsidering Three Competing Perspectives," *Political Psychology*, 6, no. 3 (1985): 375-441.
 - 22 Matthew Bauman and Phillip Potter, "The Relationship Between Mass Media, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis," *Annual Review of Political Science*, 11 (2008): 39-65.
 - 23 Adam J. Berinsky, *New Directions in Public Opinion. New Directions in American Politics*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2019); Matthew Bauman, Tim Groeling, *War Stories: The Causes and Consequences of Public Views of War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
 - 24 Richard C. Eichenberg, *Public Opinion and National Security in Western Europe: Consensus Lost?* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1989).
 - 25 Stefaan Walgrave, Stuart Soroka, Michiel Nuytemans, "The Mass Media's Political Agenda-Setting Power: A Longitudinal Analysis of Media, Parliament, and Government in Belgium (1993 to 2000)," *Comparative Political Studies*, 41, no. 6 (2008): 814-36.
 - 26 Thomas Risse-Kappen, "Public Opinion, Domestic Structure, and Foreign Policy in Liberal Democracies," *World Politics*, 43 (1991): 479-512.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a new set of opportunities arose for analyzing the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy in its former constituent states. During Soviet times, no independent public opinion polls were taken in the USSR's states, citizens were not accustomed to freely express their opinions, and researchers acquire no professional experiences with independent surveys on political issues and foreign policy. Additionally, now there are peculiarities in public opinion research in the transitional societies of Russia and the former Soviet states for which researchers have to account, such as the lingering effects of Cold War propaganda campaigns that fueled anti-American sentiments, which are today alimented by the Kremlin's disinformation and misinformation campaigns. Furthermore, public opinion formation in Putin's Russia is a captive of Kremlin's monopolization of the country's mass media. As a result, Putin dictates foreign policy rather than responding to it; his government makes foreign policy decisions—based on a unified and highly centralized model—that are simply reported by the controlled media as a *fait accompli*.²⁷

Public opinion and foreign policy research in the former Soviet states is in its infancy, and as a result, there is little data available. Independent public opinion surveys are only in the incipient stage in these countries, and a shortage of research funds makes it challenging to systematically collect detailed data. Public opinion polls conducted and published during elections by political parties are not trustworthy, or even if they are accurate, the public do not have access to the collected database to verify the results. Countries that were formerly part of the USSR are rarely included in international surveys and comparative studies; the Baltic States, which are now members of the European Union, are the exceptions.²⁸ For the most part, recent scholarship has examined public opinion on integration and enlargement of the European Union (EU) in countries that subsequently became part of the Union, and public opinion in Eastern Partnership countries toward the EU.²⁹ Only a few scholars study public

27 Olga Oliker, Christopher Chivvis, Keith Crane, Olesya Tkacheva, Scott Boston, "Russian Foreign Policy in Historical and Current Context: A Reassessment," *Defense Technical Information Center*, 1, no. 1 (2015), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA621933>, accessed 22 February 2021.

28 Piret Ehin, "Determinants of public support for EU membership: Data from the Baltic countries," *European Journal of Political Research*, 40, (2001): 31–56. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1011818717816>.

29 Paul Dekker, Albert van der Horst, Suzanne Kok, Lonneke van Noije, Charlotte Wennekers, "Europe's Neighbors. European neighborhood policy and public opinion on the European Union," *European Outlook*, no. 6 (July 2008), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269763936_Europe's_Neighbours_European_neigh

opinion and foreign policy in other former Soviet states, such as Russia, Kazakhstan, and the Ukraine.³⁰

There are only a handful of studies focused on Moldovan public opinion and foreign policy, and they examine ethnic groups' view on integration with Europe, and compare the results with those of other post-Soviet countries.³¹ Other studies analyze poverty indicators to explore the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy.³² Moldovan think tanks and NGOs such as the Institute of Public Policy and WatchDog publish the results of their surveys and analyses of public opinion and foreign policy online in Romanian, making them difficult to access by international audiences.³³

Moldovan's Attitudes Regarding the Country's Foreign Policy

In 1991, the newly independent Republic of Moldova found itself sandwiched between two powerful international actors—the Russian Federation and the European Union. As part of its efforts to achieve international recognition and solidify its newly achieved independence, Moldova established diplomatic relations with both. Geopolitics determined the foreign policy of the newly created sovereign Moldova, and its orientation was dominated by the questions of whether it should be pro-Russian or pro-Eu-

bourhood_policy_and_public_opinion_on_the_European_Union, accessed 8 February 2021; Giselle Bosse, "Ten years of the Eastern Partnership: What role for the EU as a promoter of democracy?" *European View*, 18, no. 2 (2019): 220–32.

- 30 Marlene Laruelle, Dylan Royce, "Kazakhstani Public Opinion of the United States and Russia: Testing Variables of (Un)Favorability," *Central Asia Survey*, 38, no. 2 (2019): 197–216; Richard Rose, Neil Munro, "Do Russians See Their Future in Europe or the CIS?" *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60, no. 1 (2008): 49–66.
- 31 Sergiu Buscaneanu, "Public Opinion and the Attitudes of the Ethnic Groups on European Integration of Moldova (2000–2008)," *Romanian Journal of European Affairs*, 9, no. 3 (2009): 80–92; Mamuka Tsereteli, "Georgia and Moldova: Staying the Course," in *Putin's Grand Strategy: The Eurasian Union and Its Discontents*, eds. S. Frederick Starr and Svante Cornell (Washington D.C.: Joint Transatlantic Research and Policy Center, Johns Hopkins University-SAIS, 2014), 134–44.
- 32 Monica Răileanu Szeles, "Examining the foreign policy attitudes in Moldova." *PLoS ONE*, 16, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0245322>, accessed 9 February 2021.
- 33 Valeriu Paşa, Vasile Cantarji, Irina Sterpu, "Conținutul spațiului informațional televizat din Republica Moldova și felul în care acesta modelează comportamentele electorale. Cu o evaluare a influenței ruse asupra opțiunilor geopolitice," *WatchDog*, 19 February 2018, <https://www.watchdog.md/2018/02/19/continutul-spatiu-ului-informational-televizat-din-republica-moldova-si-felul-in-care-acesta-modeleaza-comportamente-electorale-cu-o-evaluare-a-influentei-ruse-asupra-optiunilor-geopolitice/>, accessed 29 April 2021.

ropean. Political parties and their leaders capitalized on the country's dichotomous foreign policy and actively used geopolitical issues in their electoral discourse: the right-wing parties (Christian Democratic People's Party, Liberal Party) advocated for European integration, and left-wing parties (Party of Communists, Party of Socialists) called for closer ties with Russia. In the last years the centrist parties positioned themselves as either center-right groups (Action and Solidarity Party (PAS), Popular European Party, Liberal-Democrat Party) or center-left ("Sor" Party, "Our Party"), creating further divisions in the political environment and additionally increasing fragmentation among the electorate.

In addition to the political divides, there is a general deficit of knowledge pertaining to foreign policy. For instance, a survey conducted in 2000 found that only one-third of Moldovan respondents had a good understanding of EU politics.³⁴ Additional research confirmed that they have limited knowledge of foreign policy events. For example, as Moldova signed the Association Agreement with the EU in 2014, only 6 percent of Moldovans said they were "well informed," 31 percent said they are "informed," the majority (48 percent) revealed they had little knowledge, and 12 percent confessed they knew nothing about the agreement.³⁵

Public opinion polls Public Opinion Barometer (BOP), organized in Moldova by the Institute of Public Policies, showed a clear division on foreign policy choices between pro-Western (EU) and pro-Eastern (Russia) Moldovans, even when over time some variations are detectable.³⁶ Public opinion regarding Moldovan's vote to join the EU or the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), were relatively similar from 2012 to 2017 (see Figure 1). However, subsequently, a majority solidified in favor of integration into the EU, and we see a difference in about 14 percent between the support for the EU and the EEU. Support for integrating with the EEU decreased from 42 percent in 2017 to 35 percent in 2021.³⁷

34 Stephen White, Ian McAllister, Valentina Feklyunina, "Belarus, Ukraine and Russia: East or West," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 12, no. 3 (2010): 344–67.

35 Barometrul de Opinie Publică, Institutul de Politici Publice (November 2014), <https://ipp.md/old/libview.php?l=ro&idc=156&id=718>, accessed 25 March 2021.

36 This public opinion poll is conducted by the Institute of Public Policies in Moldova and sponsored by the Soros Foundation of Moldova. The data collected by BOP covers such topics as political choices, quality of life, and perceptions of the reforms implemented by the Moldovan government from 2001 to 2021.

37 Questions regarding the European Union (EU) were introduced in 2003, and questions regarding the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)—in 2012. Eurasian Customs Union (ECU) was founded in 2010 by Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, and it became the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in 2011.

According to the 2021 BOP, Moldovans were mostly pleased with their country's relationship with their neighbors. Over three-fourths (76.9 percent) were happy with the relationship with Romania, and 69.7 percent were content with the relationship with Ukraine, with the EU (69.6 percent) and with the United States (57.7 percent). Moreover, more than half of the respondents (54.5 percent) considered Moldova's relationship with Russia to be favorable. Fewer than half (47.1 percent) rated the NATO partnership positively.³⁸

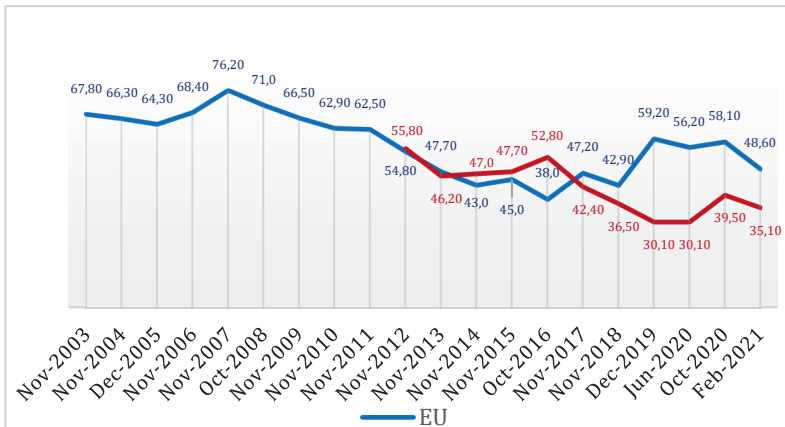


Figure 1. The results of public opinion in favor of joining the European Union or the Eurasian Economic Union (percent). Source: Compiled by the author from the Barometer of Public Opinion (BOP) data from 2003 to 2021, Institutul de Politici Publice, https://ipp.md/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/BOP_02.2021.pdf, accessed 5 March 2021.

Moldovans are also divided in their evaluations of foreign leaders' trustworthiness. Approximately 45 percent of the respondents indicated they trust Russia's President Vladimir Putin and 47 percent do not; 43 percent trust German Chancellor Angela Merkel and 39 percent do not; approximately 37 percent trust Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko and 47 percent distrust him. Even though Moldovans highly appreciate their relations with neighboring Ukraine, only 25 percent trust the Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky (the sixth position) and nearly 60 percent distrust him, ranking him the most distrusted foreign leader.³⁹ Almost half of

38 Barometrul de Opinie Publică, Institutul de Politici Publice (February 2021), <https://ipp.md/2021-02/barometrul-opinie-publice-februarie-2021/>, accessed 3 March 2021.

39 It is beyond the scope of our study to analyze this sizeable discrepancy between the positive evaluation of the neighboring country and the distrust in its leader, and this aspect deserves further analysis in other studies.

respondents would maintain the country's neutrality (46.1 percent), and only 2.7 percent support the country joining NATO, down from a 2005 high of 29 percent.

The 2021 BOP also reveals that Moldovans are active media consumers. Around 85 percent watch TV several times per week or every day; 76 percent use the Internet at the same frequency; 43 percent listen to radio daily or at least once a week; and only about 15 percent read newspapers during the week. Over three-quarters of respondents (78 percent) consider TV the most important source of information; 62 percent get their news primarily via the Internet; radio is less popular, being utilized by only 18.2 percent of respondents, while newspapers are barely mentioned at all (3.6 percent). About 2 percent of respondents admit they are not interested in news and are not informed at all.

Methods and Data

The objective of this study is to examine the role of mass media in shaping opinions regarding foreign policy. Taking into consideration that Moldova's media environment is marked by the presence of another country's media outlets, i.e., by Russian TV, Radio, newspapers, and news agencies, we formulated two primary hypotheses on public opinion formation regarding Moldovan foreign policy:

1. That *trust in* mass media from Moldova and from Russia impacts Moldovans' opinion formation on their country foreign policy⁴⁰
2. That citizen relying on *media news sources* from Moldova and Russia would have different perceptions of the country's foreign policy.

To test our hypotheses, we used both quantitative and qualitative methods, such as logistic regression tests and in-depth interviews with Moldovan experts. By using a quantitative method, we employ a large sample size, enhance generalizations about the phenomenon, and provide succinct summaries about those generalizations, and to gain an in-depth understanding of the local phenomena, we use expert interviews.

Multiple logistic regression analysis, as a method to test the relationship between our selected independent and dependent variables was employed to determine whether trust in and attention to media as a

40 Mass media from Moldova or from Russia for our study is defined as the totality of media from one country. We are using the BOP question, where is accounted the respondent's perception of mass media being from one country or another.

source of news from Moldova and Russia would remain significant in the context of several other potentially important variables.⁴¹ The regression analysis uses empirical data drawn from the February 2021 BOP survey that canvassed 1,108 adults across Moldova, excluding Transnistria, with a margin of error ± 3 percent.⁴²

Additionally, the author conducted five online in-depth personal interviews with Moldovan mass media and foreign policy experts from academic and research institutions and the NGOs, who are highly regarded in their fields. Four interviews were conducted in Romanian and one in Russian. Questions for in-depth interviews were developed to examine the reasons why the public supports membership in the EU or the EEU, to determine the causes of trust in media outlets from Moldova and Russia, and what triggers the use of media as a source of news. Additionally, the experts were asked for their insight into the relationship between the media and government structures in Moldova, media monopolization, as well as the impact of Russian propaganda.

For this study we classified the mass media from Moldova and from Russia according to the identifications in the BOP public poll. Mass media from Moldova are media produced in Moldova, and media described as “Russian media” are categorized as outlets that are re-broadcasted under the Russian brand name and identified as such by the population. Russian media include TVs channels *Pervyi Kanal*, *RTR*, *NTV*, *STS* and *TNT*, and the local versions of Russian newspapers *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Moldove*, and *Argumenty i Fakty v Moldove*. The Russian government-owned news agency *Sputnik* is also present in Moldova.

The major independent variables were determined by the formulated hypothesis and identified as trust in mass media from Moldova and from Russia, as well as the Moldovan and Russian media as news sources. Further, following the line of research described earlier in this article, we entered party affiliation and socioeconomic categories as the additional independent variables for the multiple regression.⁴³ The BOP survey asked respondents for their party voting preferences among 14 political parties. In our study, we coded all right-wing parties as pro-European, and all left-wing parties as pro-Russian. Similarly, the center-right and

41 The multiple regression allows us to describe the amount of linear relationship between the dependent variable and several other control variables. There must be a logical reason for assuming two variables covary and that one causes the other.

42 Database available here: Barometrul de Opinie Publică, Institutul de Politici Publice, February 2021, https://ipp.md/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/BOP_02.2021.pdf, accessed 23 March 2021.

43 See references 23, 24, and 25.

center-left political parties, according to their primary preferences on foreign policy options, were added to pro-EU or pro-Russia groups.

Moreover, our analysis includes factors such as gender, age, education, residence, as well as income and ethnicity. We used the BOP data and assigned the variable to two ethnic categories: the ethnic titular group—Moldovans, and the Russian-speaking, non-titular ethnic groups—Russians and Ukrainians.

As already mentioned, public opinion is divided between the pro-EU and pro-Russia foreign policy orientation, and to tests our hypotheses, we coded foreign policy option either as voting for EU accession, or as voting to join the EEU, formed by Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan.⁴⁴ Furthermore, we introduce three additional dependent variables related to foreign policy opinion formation: attitudes toward foreign countries and supranational organizations, trust in foreign leaders, and Moldova's security options. It is important to draw attention to the fact that our research is designed to study foreign policy opinion formation in terms of the East vs. West choices, and not the other options discussed in Moldova, or the future of the country. The option of Moldova's unification with Romania is not considered in our study as a separate option.⁴⁵

There is an important relationship between the presence of foreign countries in TV news, and public opinion on those countries, as the existing research points out.⁴⁶ Furthermore, attention to foreign affairs, rather than simply exposure to the news, as well as the tone of coverage about foreign countries can influence attitudes about foreign policy. We anticipate that trust in and use of Russian mass media as a news source could generate some positive attitudes toward this country. Although to determine the extension of this phenomenon, we included two dependent variables: attitude toward the Russian Federation and the EU.

To test the variable of trust in foreign leaders, we chose Russian President Vladimir Putin, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel who was the longest serving European leader at the time when the BOP survey was conducted (February 2021). The Moldovans' assessment of foreign national leaders is an important element affecting their perception of the

44 In this research we are using pro-Russian and pro-EEU foreign policy opinion interchangeably.

45 The opinion of unification with Romania was promoted in the past by the Christian Democratic People's Party (PPCD), and in the 2021 parliamentary elections by the political parties such as AUR (Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor) and the Party of National Unity (Partidul Unității Naționale (PUN).

46 Holli Semetko, Joanne Bay Brinski, David Weaver, and Lars Willnat, "TV News and US Public Opinion about Foreign Countries: The Impact of Exposure and Attention," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 4, no. 1 (1992): 18–36.

countries that the leaders represent, as “people tend to project perceptions of a foreign country’s leader onto the country as a whole.”⁴⁷

Our study also assesses the country’s militant internationalism and examines the BOP respondents’ opinions about Moldova’s security options. NATO membership is a controversial topic in Moldova, as it could be the first step to eventually joining the EU, at the same time constituting a violation of the country’s neutrality, as defined in the Moldovan Constitution.

Our multiple logistic regression analysis relied on dichotomous variables from the BOP (February 2021) data, or we transformed them into dichotomous variables.⁴⁸ There was no multicollinearity among the variables, and a regression was conducted for each selected dependent variable.

Mass Media, Voting Preferences, and Socioeconomic Factors’ Impact on Foreign Policy Opinion

The results of multiple logistic regression show that each of independent variable is statistically significant at various levels, except gender, and is reported in Figure 2 with asterisks indicating specific level of significance.⁴⁹ Trust in the Russian media is statistically significant in its association with support for the EEU (see Figure 2), lending partial support for our first hypothesis. In addition, trust in Russian media lends itself to a statistically significant positive evaluation of Putin and is still significant in forming opinions regarding the Russian Federation. Negative correlations indicate an unfavorable attitude toward Merkel among those who trust Russian media, although the correlation is not too strong. At the same time, the variable of trust in Moldovan media did not significantly correlate with any foreign policy dependent variables, controlling for the other independent variables.

When it comes to mass media as a source of information and foreign policy opinions, the results are more complex than they appear at first glance, thus, disproving our second hypothesis. The results of logistic regression analysis show that there are no significant statistical correlations between media as a source of news and all the selected dependent variables. As sources of information, neither Moldovan nor Russian media have a significant association with foreign policy preferences.

47 Meital Balmas, “Tell Me Who Is Your Leader, and I Will Tell Who You Are: Foreign Leaders’ Perceived Personality and Public Attitudes toward Their Countries and Citizenry,” *American Journal of Political Science*, 62, no. 2 (2018): 499–514.

48 The dichotomous variables are used as a model to predict the likelihood of observing one of two possibilities: 1 if the condition is present, and 0 otherwise.

49 Multiple logistic regression tests were calculated using the SPSS Statistics, version 28.

	EU integrati on	EEU integrati on	Relatio ns with EU	Relatio ns with Russia	Trust in foreign leaders/ Putin	Trust in foreign leader s/ Merkel	Security
Sex	.295 (.0285)	.187 (.278)	.030 (.292)	-.113 (.194)	.032 (.249)	.361 (.204)	.158 (.190)
Age	1.100*** (.0313)	-.986** (.286)	-.273 (.311)	-.128 (.207)	-.945*** (.264)	-.100 (.220)	-.243 (.203)
Socioeconomic status	.456* (.204)	-.164 (.194)	-.056 (.216)	-.238 (.136)	-.002 (.175)	.148 (.147)	.006 (.136)
Education	.251 (.238)	-.394 (.223)	.289 (.239)	.013 (.153)	-.105 (.202)	.249 (.164)	.526** (.156)
Residence	.101 (.308)	-.127 (.300)	-.616 (.323)	-.250 (.208)	-.584* (.274)	-.189 (.221)	.374 (.202)
Ethnicity	1.255** (.369)	-.984* (.241)	.214 (.354)	.100 (.289)	-.984* (.413)	.490 (.288)	.106 (.274)
Party voting preferences	2.333*** (.341)	-1.766*** (.304)	1.074** (.371)	-.442 (.243)	-1.903*** (.284)	1.042** (.247)	-.698** (.235)
Trust in Mold media	-.241 (.316)	-.364 (.309)	-.029 (.324)	.184 (.212)	.223 (.273)	.252 (.229)	.251 (.209)
Trust in Rus media	-.388 (.330)	1.400*** (.318)	.012 (.342)	.625** (.230)	2.226*** (.276)	-.496* (.244)	-.045 (.231)
Mold media as source of news	.479 (.323)	-.243 (.303)	.551 (.303)	.089 (.218)	-.333 (.281)	.356 (.229)	.128 (.209)
Rus media as source of news	-.568 (.331)	.340 (.300)	-.232 (.342)	-.224 (.219)	-.231 (.275)	.155 (.233)	.036 (.213)
Constant	-1.491* (.628)	1.821** (.623)	1.427* (.617)	.403 (.434)	-1.809** (.585)	-.974* (.446)	-.208 (.411)

Figure 2. Multiple logistic regression: effects of media trust and use as a news source, socioeconomic characteristics, and party support on foreign policy, opinion related to other states, trust in foreign leaders, and preferences of Moldova's security. Note: Values to the p-values (* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$) and standard errors (in parentheses). There was no multicollinearity among the variables.

Several other findings are worth mentioning. Our research shows that party preferences are statistically significant or still significant with all, except one, dependent variables. Party voting preferences were statistically significant when related to the foreign policy options, i.e., voting for the EU or EEU integration, as well as for trust in foreign leaders. The remaining significant

correlation is with the other two variables: relationship with the EU and Moldova's security options. The only variables that did not show any statistical significance are between party voting preferences and the relationship with the Russian Federation. As expected, adherents of pro-EU parties held positive attitudes toward Moldova's EU integration, favorable perceived the relationship with the EU countries, and expressed trust in Angela Merkel. In contrast, pro-Russian party supporters had a positive attitude towards EEU integration, and exhibit trust in Vladimir Putin.

The ethnicity variable was significantly correlated with the EU integration, and also with 95 percent confidence in EEU integration and trust in Putin. The positive correlation indicates that the ethnic Moldovans are supportive of EU integration, while Russian and Ukrainian citizens of the country expressed support for the EEU membership and trust in Putin.⁵⁰

In addition, all socioeconomic and demographic variables, except gender, are showing some correlation with foreign policy preferences. There was a statistically significant correlation between belonging to the 18-29 and 30-44 age groups and their opinions regarding EU integration, as well as those belonging to 45-59 and 60+ age groups and regard to trust in President Putin. The correlation between older age groups and the preference for the EEU integration is statistically significant.

Other variable, such as household income was also significantly correlated, with 95 percent confidence in EU integration, as well as the residence variable, and trust in Putin. The level of education is statistically significantly correlated with the security options of Moldova. The group of people with lower levels of education supported Moldova's *status quo* of neutrality, and the group with higher levels of education opted for Moldova's membership in NATO.

Discussion

The previously described dichotomy of public opinion on Moldovan foreign policy is somewhat similar to that found in other former Soviet Republics. For example, in the Ukraine and Georgia surveys reveal divided perceptions about their countries' foreign policies between the European Union and Russia, and public opinion fluctuated over time.⁵¹ The results of recent polls in the Ukraine, conducted after Russia's military aggression in Donbas,

50 We are using the classification of ethnicity variables recorded by BOP.

51 "Public Opinion Survey: Residence of Georgia," Center for Insights, IRI (February 2021), https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_poll_presentation-georgia_february_2021_1.pdf, accessed 20 March 2021.

show that support for the EEU dropped significantly and the Ukrainians became more focused on internal issues.⁵² In Moldova, reacting to internal political events and the actions of foreign powers, public opinion on foreign policy has fluctuated since 1991, much as it has in other countries.⁵³

Moldova established relations with the EU states, signing the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) (1994), joining the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) (2005), and endorsing the Association Agreement (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreements in 2014. The EU countries provided Moldova with assistance and support in fighting corruption, reforming the judiciary, and promoting economic growth. The fact that the EU never fully opened the door for Moldova to become a member created some challenges for the country's governing elites in providing reasons for the EU integration and it tempered public support, on the one hand. On the other, Moldova joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1994 and is highly dependent on Russia's gas and oil. Significantly consequential to Moldova's security issues, Russia maintains its 14th Army in Transnistria, a separatist region of Moldova, and actively supporting its proxies, the pro-Russian political parties. The Russian government used both the "gas diplomacy" strategy, manipulating the gas and oil prices for Moldova, and the "carrot and stick" diplomacy, imposing export sanctions on Moldovan wine and on agricultural products, while mobilizing support for the EEU and promising better conditions for the Moldovan diaspora in Russia.

Public support for EU membership reached its peak in 2007, when more than 76 percent of respondents favored Moldova's integration, although this was counterintuitive given that the Party of Communists (PCRM) held a parliamentary majority at that time. According to one expert, "all the stars lined up:" Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin refused to sign the Russian-supported Kozak Memorandum on the Transnistrian conflict's regulation, Moscow imposed economic sanctions on Moldova, and all Moldovan political parties advocated for EU membership.⁵⁴ Russia's eco-

52 "European Integration of Ukraine: the dynamics of public opinion," *Democratic Initiative Foundation* (December 2019), <https://dif.org.ua/en/article/european-integration-of-ukraine-the-dynamics-of-public-opinion>, accessed 20 March 2021.

53 Sidney Vebra, Richard Brody, Edwin Parker, Norman Nie, Nelson Polsy, "Public opinion and the war in Vietnam," *American Political Science Review*, 61, no. 2 (1967): 317-33.

54 BOP, Institutul de Politici Publice, November 2007, <https://ipp.md/old/libview.php?l=ro&idc=156&id=457>, accessed 20 March 2021; Vasile Cantargi, project manager at Center for Social Surveys and Marketing "CBS-Research," interview by the author on 23 March 2021 (online interview).

conomic intimidation and sanctions convinced the PCRM, and its leader, Vladimir Voronin, to turn to other international powers for economic support, in this case, the EU. It was merely a tactical move by the party that “never truly supported the European democratic and liberal values.”⁵⁵

Subsequently, corrupt political parties like the Democratic Party and leaders, such as its chairman, Vladimir Plahotniuc, a longtime behind-the-scenes powerbroker, discredited the pro-EU agenda. Plahotniuc was also linked to what is known as “the theft of the century,” the disappearance of \$1 billion from three Moldovan banks in 2014, which has still not been fully investigated. Plahotniuc’s ouster from parliament in June 2019 because of a government shake-up brokered by the United States, Russia, and European partners generated a wave of hope for pro-Western Moldovans. The victory of Maia Sandu in the 2020 presidential election created “new public support for democratic reforms and European values.”⁵⁶

Trust in Russian Media and Its Impact on Foreign Policy Opinion

The results of the applied regression analysis show that trust in Russian media has a significant influence on opinions related to foreign policy in the context of Moldova’s media environment characterized by monopolization, and excessive politicization. Russia’s media, retransmitted by Moldovan outlets, pose a serious threat to the country’s information security, undermining its sovereignty and independence. Kremlin media are a “Trojan horse that penetrates the Moldova media environment” promoting distrust in Moldovan state institutions and legitimately elected officials.⁵⁷ For example, Russian state-sponsored TV network *RT*’s (formerly *Russia Today*) motto “Question More” is revealing, as it casts doubt on the legitimacy of Moldova’s democratic government.

Propaganda serves as an extension of Kremlin foreign policy, promoting Russian national interests. In 2014, after Russia invaded the Ukraine and annexed Crimea, Moscow’s foreign policy, coupled with its increased disinformation and propaganda efforts and support for the overall “hybrid war,” was aimed at keeping the states of the former Soviet Union within its “sphere of influence.” Following the principle of *divide et impera* (divide and rule), Russian propaganda exploits ethnic, linguistic,

55 Natalia Stercul, Ph.D., Associate Professor at Moldova State University, International Relations, Political and Administrative Science Department, interviewed by the author on 6 April 2021 (online interview).

56 Victor Chirilă, Executive Director at Foreign Policy Association of Moldova, interviewed by the author on 25 March 2021 (online interview).

57 Victor Gotișan, expert at the Independent Journalism Center of Moldova, interviewed by the author on 20 March 2021 (online interview).

social, and historical tensions in the region to give Kremlin policies the appearance of legitimacy.⁵⁸

The majority of Russian media are under Kremlin control and supported by government funds, allowing Russian TV, for example, to create high-quality programs, mostly entertainment shows that are profitable when retransmitted by Moldovan TV stations. This creates unequal market competition for Moldovan media, which national TV channels do not benefit from the same kind of government subsidies, and private TV channels do not have the same level of sponsorship either.

The popularity of Russian television programs continues in Moldova, partly because of nostalgia for the Soviet Union among the older population, knowledge of the Russian language, and the habit of watching Russian TV entertainment shows. Russian media is exploiting key vulnerabilities in the Moldovan media market, such as the weakness of local media and a high level of monopolization that leads to their increased influence.

Russia is also taking advantage of the absence of democratic norms and regulations in Moldova, the “captured state” and the “media capture” phenomena.⁵⁹ The latter refers to politicians and media owners working together in a symbiotic yet mutually corrupting relationship: media owners provide news coverage offering favorable government treatment for their business and political interests. Russian media have been expanding their influence over Moldovan media with the help of local tycoons with whom they have financial and political ties. The Moldovan media mogul affiliated with the Democratic Party, Vladimir Plahotniuc, dominated the distribution of Russian media in 2014, owning four of the country’s five national television outlets, several radio stations, and Internet sites.⁶⁰ The retransmission of Russian media quickly changed hands after President Igor Dodon’s pro-Russian Party of Socialists of Moldova (PSRM) came to power in June 2019.⁶¹ A Russian businessman, Igor Chaika, acquired 51

58 Alla Rosca, “Media Security Structural Indicators: The Case of Moldova,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 26, no. 3 (2018): 365–400. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/699571/summary>, accessed 20 March 2021.

59 Marc Behrendt, “Moldova’s Crisis Offers Chance to Reform a Captured State,” Freedom House, 11 July 2019, <https://freedomhouse.org/article/moldovas-crisis-offers-chance-reform-captured-state>, accessed 20 March 2021.

60 Freedom in the World, 2016, Freedom House, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Freedom_in_the_World_2016_complete_book.pdf, accessed 20 February 2021.

61 Petru Macovei, Executive Director of Association of Independent Press (API), interviewed by author 30 March 2021 (online interview).

percent of “Media Invest Service” in 2020 and took control of the TV channels *Accent TV* and *Primul in Moldova*, co-owned by the PSRM associates.⁶² The Kremlin has been trying to expand its influence in Moldova via the media outlets purchased in the country by Russian oligarchs.

Trust in the Moldovan Media and Foreign Policy Opinion

There is no significant correlation between trust in the Moldovan media and foreign policy opinion formation. Despite a high level of politicization and influence by political and business interests, the mass media are underfunded, resulting in a low-quality program. The absence of a free media market and the dependence on monopolized media are causing journalists’ economic insecurities are giving rise to self-censorship. According to media experts Petru Macovei, Moldova’s mass media is stricken by “the scourge of politicization,” is biased and, therefore, is not highly popular. Civil society experts are warning that the concentration of media ownership in Moldova has reached worrying levels.⁶³ The lack of high standards in journalism, low quality of production and editorial inconsistency, together with financial reductions, are making Moldovan media uncompetitive vis-a-vis foreign (Russian) outlets. The public media broadcasters’ (*TeleRadio-Moldova*) program formats, equipment and contents are outdated, and they are not trusted by the audience.

One of the major reasons for their struggles is the lack of fair competition in the advertising market. Two companies control about 80 percent of the media advertising market, *Casa Media* and *Exclusive Sales House*, and both are close to Plahotniuc and Dodon.⁶⁴ Although direct state censorship is no longer a common practice in Moldova, different forms of political and economic pressure are restricting freedom of the media and violating the ethical principles of journalism. This affects the media’s ability to serve as WatchDogs and challenges citizens’ trust in mass media.

Use of Media as a News Source and Foreign Policy Opinion

Media consumption did not correlate significantly with foreign policy decisions, according to our research. There is a complex relationship between media trust and media consumption, and although a common supposition is that

62 “Russian Dominance on Moldovan Media Market Prevails,” *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. Country Report. Media Programme South East Europe*, March 2020. <https://www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951/Russian+Dominance+on+Moldovan+Media+Market+prevails.pdf/550e9151-5a3e-25cf-6d49-481c2b549000?version=1.1&t=1584633537034>, accessed 20 February 2021.

63 Petru Macovei, online interview, 30 March 2021.

64 Victor Gotișan, online interview, 20 March 2021.

trust is meaningful, it does not always generate media use. Another explanation could be linked to the emerging high-choice media environment with its increasing number of digital and social media, which might facilitate “news avoidance,” an occurrence described as evasion of traditional media to obtain news and obtaining information from different online sources.⁶⁵

A wide range of cases demonstrate that people’s use of the media is ritualized rather than instrumental, habitual rather than active, and for other reasons than to obtain information.⁶⁶ Moldova is also prone to this phenomenon. One Soviet era legacy—especially among Moldova’s older generation—is “continuing to watch Russian television entertaining shows, but not necessarily seeking out information from the Russian media.”⁶⁷ Russia’s TV entertainment, old and new shows, is still well-made and generously funded, and continues to attract a large audience.

Political Preferences and Foreign Policy Opinion

The research results are showing that political voting preferences have strong correlation with foreign policy opinion, which is consistent with some of the previous research done on public opinion and foreign policy in the U.S.⁶⁸ However, the results are mixed on political preferences and their impact on foreign policy opinions in countries with many political parties.⁶⁹ Moldova’s political landscape also includes a large number of political parties, for instance, in May 2021 there were 52 registered political parties.⁷⁰ Moldovan political parties are not formed according to “ideological criteria,” but they are actively advocating for different foreign policy options. Political parties are highly polarized on issues of foreign policy, employ geopolitical discourse and manipulate the electorate with increasing aggressive and discordant rhetoric. Consequently, the electorate is becoming even more divided and apathetic about democratic reforms.

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- 65 Jesper Strömbäck, Yariv Tsfati, Hajo Boomgaarden, Alyt Damstra, “News media trust and its impact on media use: toward a framework for future research,” *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 44, no. 2 (2020): 139–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2020.1755338>.
- 66 Alan Rubin, “Uses and gratifications: An evolving perspective of media effects,” in *The Sage handbook of media processes and effects*, eds. Robin Nabi and Mary Beth Oliver (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009), 147–59.
- 67 Petru Macovei, online interview, 30 March 2021.
- 68 Holsti, “Public Opinion and Foreign Policy.”
- 69 Ana Paulla, Borges Pinho, “Brazil’s global aspirations and the public: an assessment on perspectives, drivers and consistency,” *Mural Internacional*, 6, no. 2 (1918): 163–74.
- 70 Lista Partidelor Politice din Republica Moldova, Agenția Servicii Publice, <http://www.asp.gov.md/ro/node/3664>, accessed 10 June 2021. Since independence, during a period of 30 years, a total of 102 political parties were registered in the Republic of Moldova.

Ethnicity and Foreign Policy Attitudes

The discussions concerning ethnic identity, along with ethno-political conflict in Transnistria, and the cultural-administrative Autonomous Territorial Unit (UTA) of Gagauzia have given rise to debate regarding foreign policy. According to the 2014 Census, Moldovans constitute about 75 percent of population, with identical linguistic and cultural bonds to their Romanian compatriots (7 percent), in addition to the Ukrainians (6.6 percent), the Russians (4.1 percent), the Gagauz (4.6 percent) and the Bulgarians (1.9 percent). The research' results met our expectations regarding the opinions of different ethnic groups on Moldovan foreign policy. The non-titular ethnic groups are mainly pro-Russian, due to their affinity with Slavic culture and their historical memory from the Soviet past. When speaking of "national minorities," the term is synonymous with Russian-speaking population, and they view the Russian Federation as their "safe harbor" and President Putin as their "protector." Substantial numbers of the non-titular ethnic groups, particular older population attend the Russian Orthodox Church, still follow Russian celebrities, and have high regard for Russian media. They are misled by Russian propaganda into believing that the EU will promote homosexuality, destroy local morality, as defined by Christian Orthodoxy, and allow Romanian troops to enter the country.⁷¹ Ethnic minorities are also concerned about their future social and economic situation, as they believe they would need to learn new languages, and that joining the EU would lower their living standards and harm business because they would need to bring their products up to the EU standards. These findings are also in line with those of previous studies that attest Euroscepticism of non-titular ethnic minorities in Moldova.⁷² Not only knowledge of Russian language and adherence to conservative values make them susceptible to Russian media propaganda, but also separatist rhetoric of the regional and local elites and ethnic leaders who follow their own interests and perceive foreign powers, e.g., Russia, to benefit them.

Socioeconomic and Demographic Variables and Opinion on Foreign Policy

Our results, showing the generational divide regarding foreign policy, echo previous research that found younger generations to be more open-minded and supportive of international cooperation than are the older

71 Petru Macovei, online interview, 30 March 2021.

72 Marcin Kosienkowski, "Moldova's National Minorities: Why are they Eurosceptical," *Russie.Nei Visions*, no. 81 (November 2014), https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ifri_rnv_81_eng_moldova_minorities_november_2014_0.pdf, accessed 23 March 2021.

generations.⁷³ That is true in transitional economies, as the generational effect theory suggests, in which the young generations tend to be more progressive.⁷⁴ Moldova's younger generations are supportive of EU accession, as it is associated with liberal and pro-democratic values and beliefs, while the pro-Russian orientation of older people is associated with Orthodox Christianity and traditional values.

There is also a correlation between socioeconomic status and the Moldovans' opinions on EU integration. Those of lower socioeconomic status positively correlate with the European orientation, which supports the idea that people hope to benefit from the Association Agreement (AA) and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), both signed between the Republic of Moldova and the EU in 2014.

Education and Moldova's Neutrality

The low level of education correlated with the decision to maintain Moldova's neutrality, and the reasoning could be found in the complexity of this issue. On one hand, the Constitution of Moldova stipulates the state's neutrality; on the other, Moldova has developed a wide-range partnership with NATO, participated in the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program since 1994, and signed an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) in 1997. The government never expresses its intentions to have Moldova become a NATO member, and the majority of Moldovans have not expressed support for NATO membership. Lack of trust in the available information distributed by Moldova's media means that citizens do not fully understand the conditions of current cooperation and the effects of potential NATO membership. Furthermore, Russian media propaganda disseminate disinformation and misconceptions regarding Moldova's cooperation with NATO, misleading and threatening the audience with allegedly aggressive NATO behavior and even military invasion.

73 Pal Kolstø, Andrei Malgin, "The Transnistrian Republic: A Case of Politicized Regionalism," *Nationalities Papers The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 26, no. 1 (1988): 103–27; Monica Răileanu Szeles, "Examining the foreign policy attitudes in Moldova," *PLoS ONE* 16, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0245322>, accessed 9 February 2021.

74 Mark Tessler, Carrie Konold, and Megan Reif, "Political Generations in Developing Countries Evidence and Insights from Algeria," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 68, no. 2 (2004): 184–216.

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to study Moldovan public opinion vis-à-vis the country's foreign policy and to examine the role of mass media in forming that opinion. Multiple logistic regression analyses of the opinion poll allowed us to present a glimpse of mass media and public opinion in a country that is still in transition and located at the crossroads between the West and the East. Our results show a divided public opinion, and a strong influence of trust in Russian media and on foreign policy opinion, while trust in Moldovan media did not show any significant correlation with foreign policy opinion.

The results show that the public is ill-informed and public opinion regarding foreign policy in Moldova is changeable and has no defined construct. This provides partial support of the provisions of the *Almond-Lippmann consensus* that public opinion is volatile and does not have structure or coherence.

The limited data, extracted solely from BOP public poll conducted in February 2021, circumscribes the findings of this study. For instance, Moldova is a country of mass migration and the Moldovans living abroad maintain close family ties and friendships at home; thus, the variable of migration destination, not included in the analyzed BOP poll, could be valuable to the following research. Additional research could explore the broader picture, including the rapidly diversifying media environment, such as online media outlets and social media. Online sources are increasingly gaining popularity as news reference, particularly among younger generations, and this aspect should be considered by future researchers focused on mass media and foreign policy.

Future research could also focus on the content of Russian media in Moldova, specifically their topics, perspectives, and methods used to influence public opinion in a foreign country. Relatedly, subsequent research of Moldovan media that are retransmitting Russian channels, should prioritize their financial underpinnings and political interest.

The findings presented in this article can prove useful to national and regional policymakers, analysts, and strategists. Moldova is the EU's neighbor and a member of the Eastern Partnership and understanding the foreign policy attitudes of the public may be of value to EU decision-makers. In the past decade, as foreign and security policies in Europe have evolved and faced increasing challenges, the role of public opinion has grown. An analysis of a new dataset examining a non-EU country located at the crossroads of the EU and Russia, which is understudied, could prove to be a valuable resource.