Polarization of civil society in the republic of Moldova between east and west in shaping perceptions and loyalties✳

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Introduction

The increasing interest in the role of civil society within the development of the contemporary state and society across the world has opened a huge opportunity in social sciences. Theories and analytical models were used and adapted within trans-disciplinary frameworks to contribute to epistemology related to civil society. To this end, the empirical analysis in approaching case studies has a major role in testing and adjusting research methodologies, either by providing evidence in consolidation of conceptual and theoretical background by finding patterns or, revising them, underlying weaknesses, and suggesting new approaches.

Our contribution is dedicated to a case study that poses a challenge due to the need to understand how the Republic of Moldova as a state and democracy that emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, has experimented with the development of civil society and engaged itself within a process of transition toward the Western liberal democratic model. The case of the Republic of Moldova represents a challenge, having in mind its geopolitical condition of being placed between two spheres of interest (West and East) which both interfere with the development of the Moldavian state and society. This interference might be underlined by using the concept of polarization, which affected the overall statehood of Moldova: political system, civil society, and citizens' national and ethnic identities. Therefore, the main research question that guided our study can be simply formulated: What are the main political cleavages/attitudes generated along with polarization that can be captured?

Within the organization of the paper, we consider that a conceptual framework must be formulated regarding how we understand and choose to apply the issue of polarization, insisting on the West-East divide. The section describing the framework of analysis underlines and clarifies the main hypotheses of the research, emphasizing the research questions, organizing the overall approach, and identifying the main variables and methods to be used. The literature review is approached by adapting the conceptual frameworks toward the specific context of our investigation. The descriptive section regarding the evolution of civil society in the case study underlines the political/identity emancipation before the Declaration of Independence in the late 1980's early 1990's'. The specific patterns of polarization are analyzed within the development of the Moldavian state, with a focus on civil society. A challenging approach is to identify how the adoption of the democratic model encouraged, beyond the formation of the political system, the emergence of civil society actors and structures, and the overall legal framework dedicated to civil society. Indeed, the Western model of civil society became a pattern in the development of Moldavian society, but in a diluted and polarized way as the Russian Federation pushed and still pushing its influence. The empirical evidence is based upon communication networks, as a key to shaping perceptions and attitudes, emphasizing the role of social media in our days.

Polarization and civil society: a conceptual and theoretical framework

In social sciences, the concept of polarization is constantly reevaluated as an important contribution to methodological assessments of understanding social, economic, political, and anthropological perspectives on the issue of diversity and types of interaction within states and societies. Polarization is strongly related to diversity, as a foundation for describing or prescribing options and alternatives to certain ideas, actions, and particular types of perception and behavior of societal actors. Previous reflections and analyses of the concept of polarization didn't manage to provide a unitary framework of comprehension, due to the contextual or sectorial approaches. Still, the scientific debates generated a spectrum of understanding, able to frame the main features of how polarization can be operationalized and adapted to particular analytical methodologies designed for specific case studies. Within the framework of our analysis, our attention is focused on some general and specific definitions and interpretations that can guide us in framing the concept of polarization and its role in the development of civil society in the Republic of Moldova.

Firstly, a framework of debate on the concepts of polarity and polarization was approached during the Cold War as a metaphoric use of describing the functioning of the international system by the two competing superpowers, the U.S. and Soviet Union (Græger – Heurlin – Wæver, Wivel 2022). This (bipolar) system with two great powers was so overwhelmingly powerful that alignments between other states could not upset the balance of power (Morgenthau, 1954: 325–326).

The polarization was characterized by a deep divergence in terms of ideology (liberal democracy versus communism), and the rivalry engaged all possible resources of each side to contain the influence of the other. Although the threat of military confrontation was present, the bipolar system was considered to be more stable and predictable (Waltz 1964).

After the end of the Cold War, polarity remained within the dictionary of IR scholars, in their attempts to understand the emergence of the new international order. In this context, the moment of unipolarity (hegemony of the US) in the 1990s, was surpassed and replaced with the idea of multipolarity and polarization tendencies in the world, among the most powerful actors, both as a challenge to the US dominant position, as well as attempting to provide alternatives to unipolarity (Nye 2019). However, the new form of polarization was not expressed in ideological terms but in identity variables related to civilizational terms.

In the view of Samuel Huntington, "In the post-Cold War world, for the first time in history, global politics has become multipolar and multicivilizational" (Huntington 1996: 21). The idea of civilizational polarization is challenging the supremacy of Western civilization by understanding the world as "the West and the rest", and accepting the existence of many non-Wests (Huntington, 33). There is now a consistent interest based on empirical research which suggests that even the most consolidated democracies are facing forms of polarization. That is why, from the perspective of political science, an important debate upon polarization has been focused on US politics, and in this context, the conceptual framework has been developed to understand the state level as a distinct unit of analysis as well as the specific behavior of the stakeholders (Pharr–Putnam 2000; Ezra 2020; Fiorina 2017).

The polarization transcends toward a socio-psychological dimension, where emotions, fears, and expectations determine change in reactions, attitudes, and behavior within and among groups (Prooijen 2021: 1). This psychological approach proposes a working definition of political polarization, as *"the extent to which citizens become ideologically entrenched in their own values and political beliefs, thereby increasing the divide with citizens who hold different values and political beliefs"* (Prooijen 2021: 2).

If we take into consideration the evolution of the informational environment in the past two decades, the amount and diversity of information can no be longer processed rational, but selective and instinctive. This situation creates a favorable environment for misinformation, disinformation, fake news, deception, and other forms of communication which expand polarization, in the interest of the sponsors. Identity-related subjects are the most sensitive, especially if are presented as existential threats.

As a provisional conclusion, in attempting to define polarization, we emphasize the existence of at least two groups within the same reference unit (state, society, collectivity) which have distinct perceptions, based on their assumed group identity, that guide their behavior toward the promotion of certain ideas and actions, considered to be not only in the best interest of the group but also for the whole interest of the reference unit.

Framework of analysis

The main hypothesis aims to demonstrate that the polarization of civil society in the Republic of Moldova can be analyzed and understood as a framework of debate and participation of different societal actors and civil society entities whose actions are influenced by two opposing geopolitical vectors of development: toward the West (the path of European integration) and East (within the gravity of Moscow's interests and toward the Russian inspired project of Eurasian integration). Having in mind the political and societal processes that transformed Moldova in the past decades, civil society has developed along with the state, and due to the heterogeneity of society and the options for development, influenced by the integration processes in the West and the legacy of the past, the post-soviet alternatives of enhanced cooperation within Community of Independent States and Eurasian Union.

East and West represent civilizational poles that can inspire, mobilize, and sustain political projects and civic attitudes, both in foreign policy orientation as well as in the overall development of the state. In this perspective, the main research questions able to provide the arguments to demonstrate our hypothesis are: Q1: What are the factors contributing to civil society polarization? And Q2: What are the narratives used in the polarization process? We consider that the CSO as a distinct sector within the state, has been caught in the polarization process and to some ends, is contributing to this process.

From a methodological viewpoint, we identify a distinct category of variables that can be associated with identity polarization based on self-identification (nationality, ethnicity, language, and religion). From this point, the polarization of civil society can be analyzed by identifying the factors of how each entity belonging to civil society is positioning itself, directly or indirectly, more or less explicitly, based on the discursive actions that can be associated with particular interests related to one of the two polarizing vectors: East, representing Russian Federation's regional projects (Eurasian integration) and the West, the Euro-Atlantic Community and European integration. As this entire spectrum of identity-based loyalties and preferences it's a result of historical evolutions, societal interactions, political constructions, and external interferences, all societal actors are becoming involved and influenced, to some extent, in the polarization process. The key element in shaping polarization is the discourse and narratives formulated, shared, and contested among all societal actors.

At this point, civil society as a concept needs to be defined and circumscribed. We take the institutional perspective towards civil society, looking into how civil society organizations function and their role in the public and private sectors. The EU definition is significant for this research: *"A CSO is an organizational structure whose members serve the general interest through a democratic process and which plays the role of mediator between public authorities and citizens"* (EUR-Lex, n.d).

Comparative method is to be used to identify the features which determine each actor to position itself. By deductive approach, empirical research is emphasizing that through actions and promoted narratives, the actors of civil society reveal their preferences and position in the East-West polarity spectrum. In this perspective, the sources used in the research are organized based on the literature review of scientific papers, reports, statistics, public opinion polls, and media monitoring analysis.

Literature review

The Republic of Moldova, like other former Soviet republics, became an interesting research subject in social sciences, particularly political science, due to the original post-Cold War evolutions and geopolitical reorganization of the ex-Soviet space (Brie 2021). The new approaches to understanding the international system as well as the transitions toward democratic societies generated an extensive research agenda that accumulated a high level of knowledge as well as new perspectives on political and societal evolutions. Within our research, we aimed to review previous literature that can articulate and sustain the conceptual and theoretical framework as well as the possible contributions in sustaining our findings and arguments. The fundamental works of Hans Morgenthau and Samuel P. Huntington provided the core theoretical and conceptual framework to understand polarization from the perspective of IR. In the same perspective, to have a clearer view of the articulation of the Eurasian perspective, the works of Alexandr Dughin were useful, mainly in providing the core messages of contesting Western values (Dughin 2014). The understanding of the post-Soviet transformations and particularly the evolutions in Moldova in the early 1990s has been facilitated by the contributions gathered in the scientific journals that approached the so-called post-soviet studies *(Russian Review, Political Science Quarterly, International Organizations, Nationalities Papers)*.

Among the experts, specifically on post-soviet space and Moldova, William Crowther's contributions were fundamental to understanding an initial approach that suggested emerging polarization and conflictual patterns within a multicultural context. On the issue of polarization, we discovered that there's an increasing interest in re-evaluating this concept as a tool that can be adapted for understanding divided societies and the mechanisms engaged in these processes. The extensive analysis was approached from different perspectives by Ezra Klein, *Why we're polarized;* Fiorina P. Morris *Unstable Majorities. Polarization, Party Sorting and Political Stalemate* and Jan-Willem van Prooijen, *The Psychology of Political Polarization* and were fundamental in articulating the concept of polarization. About the specific experience of the Republic of Moldova, analyzed by Moldavian authors, there are both historical and socio-political analyses of the evolution of the Moldavian state and society which inevitably emphasizes elements and processes of polarization.

Still, the civil society in Moldova is not properly analyzed considering the huge potential of research within a transformative and adaptive environment and context where geopolitical choices are made. We also took into consideration the idea that the general crisis of democracy is related to polarization, having in mind the role of CSOs in consolidated democracies, but our insight is that the new democracies confront different experiences. From a methodological perspective, the above statement has stood as an argument for us based on the deep analysis provided by McCoy, J.–Rahman, T.–Somer, M. (2018).

Societal and political polarization in the Republic of Moldova

Moldova's geographical positioning is situated at the crossroads of two main geopolitical projects: European integration versus Russia's efforts to hold onto its sphere of influence over the former Soviet republics (Simionov 2023: 205). The geopolitical pressures have been present since the settlement of the Republic of Moldova as an independent state in 1991 and contributed to the polarization of preference formation, especially after the effective enlargement of NATO and the EU (Brie–Horga 2014). As a consequence, there were general and ambiguous perceptions toward the positive attraction of the West, as long as the East was not able to propose a credible and functional project to maintain the previous relations between Moscow and its periphery. Since its inception, the Moldavian state had to assume its geopolitical location having in mind the need for statehood consolidation, having in mind that it had no previous experience as an independent state. Beyond the legal and institutional adaptation, Moldova, like other former Soviet republics, struggled with identity issues primarily because „*at the time of their creation, the borders of these countries did not coincide with the sense of national identity of the inhabitants*" (Simionov 2023: 203). As in other non-Russian regions of the USSR, Soviet policy produced a substantial degree of political and ethnic alienation in Moldova (Crowther 1993: i). Before the declaration of independence, within the context of the late 1980s policies of Perestroika and Glasnost, promoted by Gorbachev, there was a "Moldavian national emancipation movement" around the status of the Moldavian language within the republic. The language state law was passed on 31 August 1990 and in this context, Moldova's Russophone minorities (Russian, Ukrainian, and Gagauz) mobilized to advance their interests in opposition to what they perceived as threatening behavior on the part of the Moldovan majority (Crowther 1993: 3). So, with the polarization upon the linguistic issues as a background. Russian-speaking communities initiated their political projects around separatist movements: the Republic of Gagauzia as a part of the USSR and the Dniester Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, on the left banks of the Dniester River (Tâcu 2022: 42).

After the declaration of independence of Moldova (27 August 1991) the tensions increased, culminating with the Trans-Dniester War in 1992, as an expres-

sion of inter-ethnic conflict/separatist war. This experience led to the acceptance of the Gagauz Autonomous Republic as a distinct entity within the future of the Moldavian state, and an unfinished crisis (frozen conflict) in the East (Brie – Costea – Petrila 2023). These realities imposed a distinct agenda for internal politics where language and identity remained an important variables that contributed to the maintenance of societal polarization and proved to be a very useful instrument in political debates and electoral campaigns for all parts interested in blocking the Western orientation of Moldova's foreign policy (Brie–Putină 2023). With the experiences of the early 1990's the political elites failed to clarify if Moldova is to be consolidated as a civic nation or an ethnic nation (Ticu 2018). This situation generated a confused environment where the agenda of the new political elites expressed the first form of polarization where identity factors were dominant (Dungaciu 2017).

A distinct form of polarization can be identified in terms of religious affiliation, as an important variable in national/ethnic identity, as well as in the overall societal environment. Religion has been emphasized as an important component of civil society (Petrila–Tepelea 2022; Ferrari 2011). Although the inhabitants of Moldova are a large majority Christian Orthodox (93%), there are two distinct entities: the Metropolis of Chisinew and All Moldova, situated under the patronage of Moscow Patriarchy and the Metropolis of Bessarabia, affiliated to the Romanian Patriarchy, restored after the fall of Soviet Union (Sprânceană–Nemescu–Bejenari 2019). But in the new context of democratic transition, the role of the church was fundamental in consolidating identities as well as in shaping civic and even political attitudes, by direct interference of the Orthodox church in electoral campaigns (Doroftei 2019).

From a geopolitical perspective, the above identity variables shape the polarization of the geopolitical orientation of Moldova in terms of civilizational affiliation according to the two main vectors (Brie 2021). Firstly, *Western civilization* is identified with liberal democracy and consequent fundamental features: rule of law, political pluralism, free elections, participation, separation of powers, respect of human rights, a functional civil society, market economy, free speech, etc. These elements are articulated and assumed within the European Union, with its core values and norms which generate welfare and security among states and citizens (Brie–Jusufi–Polgar 2023). Secondly, *Eastern civilization,* in contradiction, is characterized by opposed or blurred elements generated during the particularities of the inherited political and social experiences of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union (Brie–Jusufi–Polgar 2023).

The multicultural specificity of the Moldavian society generated inevitably the expression of polarization in political terms, between the "pro-Russian" and "pro-EU" camps (Burkhardt 2020: 2). Within the overall debate between the two political camps in the past three decades, political polarization took shape on the East-West divide, and it was expressed through discourse, electoral campaigns, political agendas, and governmental strategies by influencing the overall polarization of the Moldavian society.

The single common denominator among the political elites was the promotion of the idea that Moldova is a democratic country and it must keep consolidating its democracy by supporting the development of civil society. All the abovementioned dimensions of polarization (national/ethnic, linguistic, civilizational, religious, and political), are providing the insights for our first research question. If we understand the evolution of civil society considering these factors, we can observe that even the CSO became caught in this polarization phenomenon.

CSO's and Societal Polarization in the Republic of Moldova

The evolution and development of civil society in the Republic of Moldova has been in direct relationship with the evolution of the state and the processes of transition. Before independence, there were some proto-civic initiatives related to emancipation in the late 1980s', as a paradox, signs of polarization can be traced in that context (Brie–Costea–Petrila 2023). As the literary and cultural movements organized themselves in the context of new elections for the Moldovan Writer's Union (in 1987) and within the debate that emerged they initiated the Democratic Movement in Support for Restructuring (1988). Although isolated by the communist regime, a public agenda emerged toward the issue of the status of the Moldavian language.

In the South, the Gagauz Khalky (Gagauz People) emerged from a cultural club in the city of Comrat as an organization that demanded language and cultural rights for the Gagauz population and were soon followed by wider political demands, most notably the creation of a territorial autonomy (Zabarah 2012: 184).

The above-described mobilization of non-state groups represents the first element that can be associated with civil society. According to Victor Juc, the emergence of the new entities pressured the authorities to accept their registration and to this end, to adopt a decree on the provisional registration of citizens' association within the Soviet Republic of Moldova, on 25 August 1989 (Juc 2018: 88). Based in this legal framework, the Popular Front of Moldova, Gagauz Khalky, Internationalist Movement "Unitatea-Edinstvo", and the Bulgarian Socio-|Cultural Association „Vozrojdenie" were formally registered on 26 October 1989, and within the next two years additional 144 citizen's associations were registered, 17 of them claiming a social-political status (Juc 2018: 89). The lack of specific regulation and clarifications upon the formulas of association, induced a confusing framework where different initiatives could be understood both as civic as well as political. It is interesting how the initial civil society actors emerged with opposite agendas which contributed to the polarization phenomenon, based on ethnicity/language, but also affected the political reforms of 1990 and 1991, before the independence of Moldova. The imminence of a future independent Moldova posed a challenge for the non-Moldavian national/ethnic groups who feared a Moldavian state that might favor Moldavian/Romanian native speakers.

Moldavian nationalist emancipation generated a reactive nationalism from other ethnic groups (Chinn–Roper 1995).

The new path after independence was marked by the declared ambitions of the political elite to assume and implement the model of liberal democracy with the consequent elements that lay the foundation of a functional political, economic, and societal system. But without previous experience in democracy, and in particular on the role of civil society (Budurina-Goreachi 2019: 99), the perspectives were unclear but optimistic. A wide range of initiatives of associations were made within the transformative process of the early 1990's, some of them leading to the formation of political parties, while others remained as associative actors, without a clear legal status due to the lack of legal basis and specific norms for the organization of the NGO sector. In this context, we can notice the implication and registration of the first foreign/international NGOs and foundations such as Open Society Foundation, Amnesty International Moldova or the office of International Foundation for Electoral Systems (Țugui 2013: 18). At national level, at the initiative of Moldavian intellectuals there were created first NGO's: Ecologist Movement and Viitorul Foundation while other ad-hoc associative initiatives emerged as entities that can be related with civil society. Still, a significant role in the development of the Moldavian civil society is related to the creation, in 1995, of the National Assistance and Information Center for Moldavian NGO's CONTACT which helped and guided the processes of initiating new organizations (Țugui 2013).

Under these circumstances, the need to boost the democratic transition imposed a clearer legislative arrangement to facilitate the functioning and participation of civil society. Between 1996 and 2002 the relevant legislation was adopted: *The Law of public associations (1996), the Law on Foundations (1999), the Trade Union Law (2000), and the Civil Code (2002)* (Putină–Brie 2023: 85). These basic legal regulations, alongside with other legal arrangements (networking, charity actions, volunteering, public associations, local actions groups), lays the foundation of functioning civil society and opened a window of opportunity that led to the official registration until nowadays of more than 14000 entities. Even if this amount seems encouraging for a strong civil society, it is estimated that only 25% to 30% are active. The main challenge that obstructed the activity of the NGOs is the ability or opportunity to access grants or other financial resources. To this end, most of the active NGO's are highly dependent on financial support from abroad, mainly international organizations and foreign governments which makes their financial viability a challenge in medium- and long-term perspective (Putină – Brie 2023: 93-94). There is important and relevant statistical data about the current functioning of the civil society in Moldova which is very valuable for understanding the evolution of this sector. For instance, the CSO *Sustainability Index for Moldova* provides a great amount of quantitative information but there is a lack of qualitative information regarding the motivation and initiative, agenda setting, communication strategies, specific actions and narratives, societal influence, and the overall impact of the civil society sector in Moldova (Brie–Putină 2023).

Very important and relevant information is related to the perception among public opinion about the role of the CSOs. According to the Public Opinion Barometer survey conducted in November 2022, public trust in CSOs decreased during the year. Only 24 percent of respondents said that they trusted CSOs, compared to 30 percent in June 2021. Significant fluctuations in public perceptions of CSOs from year to year most likely result from a poor understanding of the concept of CSOs and their role in society (CSO Sustainability Index for Moldova 2023: 10), but also as a consequence of the confusion generated by the effects of the overall polarization of Moldavian society. The societal and political polarization in Moldova gathers the identity variables circumscribed within civilizational and geopolitical vectors of integration. The specific elements of each paradigm are opposed by the way the political and public discourse is organized alongside the particular agenda of each societal actor. In the case of pro-West CSOs, these entities are easy to identify due to the open and transparent character of their activities. The sources of funding are transparent as well as their reports.

The core values of democratic vision can be recognized in their agenda as well as their ability to engage in networks with similar NGOs for a more coherent approach to different sectorial issues (Brighidin–Godea–Ostaf–Trombiţki–Ţarelunga–Vacaru 2007). An important feature we discovered is the ability to monitor each other, to provide support one to another, and to share knowledge on specific topics. In this perspective, we observed the contributions of Open Society Moldova as well as common platforms that enhance cooperation among NGOs. The narratives promoted are strongly associated with what can be observed within a functional civil society specific for liberal democracy: human rights, (including LGBTQ), gender equality, justice, free speech, monitoring and participation in legislative drafting, inclusion, and a permanent presence and involvement in public life.

Within research and monitoring related to the topic of information warfare in Moldova, there have been identified the most active CSOs which promote the pro-East/pro-Russian narratives (Mârzac-Marin 2016). In a study conducted in 2016, there were identified such groups and civic activists, whose messages and narrations were designed to induce the idea that the values of the West (EU, NATO, USA) are an existential threat to Moldova and its society (Chifu–Nantoi 2016). In this context, anti-Western and pro-Kremlin narratives in Moldova are infused with geopolitical rifts, based on linguistic, cultural, and political polarization (Sillanpaa–Gogu–Munteanu–Bunduchi–Parvan–Cepoi 2016: 21).

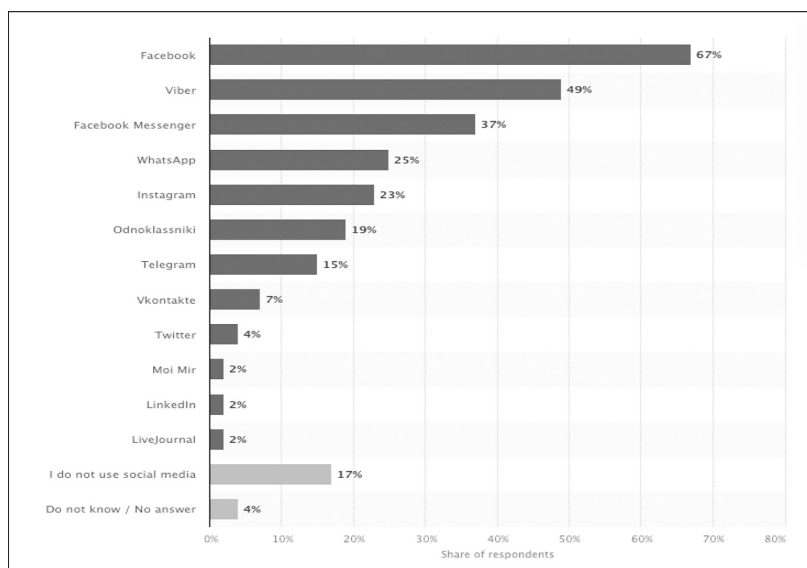## Social media as a factor of polarization in the Republic of Moldova

How social media contributes to polarization.

Early social media (SM) engagement in politics highlighted its democratic nature, exemplified by the Arab Spring (Fung 2019). Events, like Brexit and the 2016 U.S. presidential election revealed SM's darker role, marking a shift from a democratic tool to one that fosters polarization, discontent, and manipulation. One root cause of social media polarization is intrinsic and is tied to algorithmic governance. For instance, a significant part of the Facebook algorithm is used to maximize user engagement, namely the amount of time spent on the platform (Hao 2021). Researchers, such as have called this "surveillance capitalism", Zuboff (2019) or a "chaos machine" (Fisher 2022). The second root cause of social media as a source of polarization is extrinsic and refers to the weaponization of this tool by hostile actors. While there is no strong empirical evidence to this effect, as (Eady et al. 2023) show in their analysis, research does find significant Russian influence campaigns. There is no consensus regarding which of these root causes has played a more significant part in American polarization, which becomes an even more daunting task when looking into other smaller online battlegrounds, such as Moldova.

The Moldavian social media and Internet landscape.

Currently, statistics show that two-thirds of households are connected to the Internet, with a total population of 2.5 million people (European Commission 2023). The social media landscape is diverse, with several social media platforms being used in the Moldovan society. Figure 1 shows the distribution of social media usage. When looking at social messaging applications, Viber (49%), Whatsapp (25%), and Telegram (15%) are the most used. Facebook (67%), Instagram (23%), and Odnoklassniki (19%) are the most used of the social media platforms. Odnoklassniki is a Russian social networking site, whose usage has decreased, according to other data (Vozian, n.d.). Tik-Tok is not present in this analysis, but other data sources show that approximately one hundred thousand users are active in Moldova (Start. io, n.d.).

Figure 1. Usage of Social Media Platforms in RM

Evidence of social media polarization in the Republic of Moldova

The main argument of this section starts from the idea that social and cultural cleavages that define RM are reflected in the usage of social media. Given that the Republic of Moldova is a country with clear identity clashes, as well as strong debates regarding the movement towards Russia or the European Union, social media is used extensively as a venue for public debate. It is the second most used medium of information in Moldova (Internews 2023). What is significant is that trust in social media is growing, while it is dropping for all the other media (Internews 2023). Social media is less used in rural areas, while urban areas are more involved in social media. Culturally, the Russian-speaking community is more active on Russian-born social media platforms, while the Romanians tend to go for other platforms, such as Facebook.

The main narrative surrounding the public debates in Moldova is based on the idea of information warfare. Several reports emphasize Russia's information warfare unraveling in the Republic of Moldova (Euro-Atlantic Resilience Centre 2023). This points to the extrinsic cause of social media as a factor of polarization. Russian-backed entities exploit the algorithms and usage habits of the Moldovan people and take advantage of the cleavages in the Moldovan society. For instance, Russian-based Odnoklassniki has been used in political campaigns to support pro-Russian candidates and is a source of Russian propaganda with Anti-Ukraine, anti-American, and anti-EU messaging (Institutul de Politici Publice 2018).

However, as Figure 1 shows, its usage has decreased, as Facebook surpassed it to become the top social media platform in RM.

At the same time, Facebook emerged as the platform for pro-Western campaigns in several national elections across the years (Vozian, n.d.). However, one cannot support the contention that polarization is only rooted in the disparate usage of the platforms, especially considering the wide gap in usage between the two. Yet, there is evidence that Facebook is exploited to maintain the cleavages in the society in shift from TV to online and social media by the Russian-backed actors following the 2023 ban on Russian propaganda (Euronews 2023). Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Moldova sought to limit the amount of Russian propaganda on its territory by banning Russian-backed TV channels. However, this only determined a rise in Facebook messages and posts to target the Moldovan population with pro-Russia messages (Euronews 2023).

Findings and conclusion

The new socio-political realities, associated with a process of consolidation and strengthening democracy, have led to the redrawing of the social structure in the Republic of Moldova. Competition and mutual distrust marked the first two decades after the independence of the state, but slowly, the society matured and the injuries of the past began to heal and the idea of liberal democracy started to be more and more implemented. Civil society was born after the fall of communism but still was affected by the lack of financial support and a proper legislative framework. The idea that democracy, the rule of law, and civil society are not similar or connected might seem incorrect or strange to some, especially nowadays, when these concepts are perceived as the foundation of democracy.

The Republic of Moldova represents a good testing ground for analyzing the impact of civil society on the polarization process. First, the Republic of Moldova has been and still is home to major disputes and efforts to accelerate democratization. Second, civil society was built from scratch after 1991 and third, Moldova's civil society is much more attentive and involved nowadays in the process of polarization. Therefore, if a role by civil society is expected in the phenomena of polarization, this is likely to be detected in the Republic of Moldova and the Eastern neighborhood, where the societies themselves and international actors have actively sought to contribute to the polarization process. While civil society is analytically distinct from the state, the economy, and political society, in reality, the boundaries are blurred. A lack of autonomy curtails their ability to act as democratic watchdogs by ensuring accountability and controlling the power abuses of political elites. Democracy reflects a different content of meaning according to the type of politics. Nowadays it has become clear that in the political discourse, there is a lively debate about the value content of democracies, which also presents the different attitudes in the East and in the West of the European continent.

In the Republic of Moldova, within the overall debate between the two political camps in the past three decades, political polarization took shape on the East-West divide, and it was expressed through discourse, electoral campaigns, political agendas, and governmental strategies by influencing the overall polarization of the Moldavian society. The single common denominator within the political elites was the promotion of the idea that Moldova is a democratic country and it must keep consolidating its democracy by supporting the development of civil society (Brie–Putină 2023). The issue, which concerns the influence of social networks over the political and societal sphere is evident. Although, definitions are needed for the fundamental concepts, identifying the ways through which social networks can influence political and societal crises.

Delimiting social media from state structures is a necessary premise for the emergence of democracy and can be seen as a necessary element for the emergence of civil society, considered as an indispensable element of a democratic social system. Based on the data and the presented results regarding social media as a factor or tool of polarization, we can affirm that social networks increase the potential of mobilizing and influencing the public agenda. All the mentioned dimensions and tools of polarization from the article (national/ethnic, linguistic, civilizational, religious, political, and social media), are providing insights for our main hypothesis. If we understand the evolution of civil society considering these factors, we can observe that even the CSOs became caught in this polarization phenomenon.

The results of the study confirm our main hypothesis that the polarization of civil society in the Republic of Moldova can be analyzed and understood as a framework of debate and participation of different societal actors and civil society entities whose actions are influenced by two opposing geopolitical vectors of development. This is valid since it is obvious that Moldavian civil society was born and has developed along with the new, democratic, and independent state due to the heterogeneity of the society. All this contributed to several political and societal processes that transformed the Republic of Moldova in the past decades.

The evolution and development of civil society in the Republic of Moldova has been in direct relationship with the evolution of the state and the processes of transition. The current stage of civil society in the Republic of Moldova can be marked as the rise of the new civil society, as the circle has moved slowly from generalist to specialized organizations and where the newly established organizations are led by the new generation of young leaders of the country. Nevertheless, the main problem of the civil society in the Republic of Moldova remains the absence of the critical mass, needed to become a serious actor at either national or local level.

The societal and political polarization in Moldova gathers the identity variables circumscribed within civilizational and geopolitical vectors of integration. The specific elements of each paradigm are opposed by the way the political and public discourse is organized alongside the particular agenda of each societal actor.

Basically, the Republic of Moldova's political leadership and societies need to decide what should civil society be, and what role should play. There are several possibilities. In the context of this research civil society can play the role of an agent, perhaps even a ferment, of change. On the other hand, it can stay as a simple, but passive actor. According to the well-known role civil society organizations played in starting the democratization and social development processes in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of communism seems that the first option should be taken into consideration.

In sum, this research shows that while civil society can be unprepared in the beginning and during the polarization phenomena, and while it can lag behind the relative power of politics, it can have a major role in implementing and deciding the direction and the impact of the polarization process.

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