

SEA SHIELD 2018

How NATO's display of force was reflected in Romanian online media

MAY 2018



PHOTO: Ionuț Felea (SOURCE: The Romanian Naval Forces official Facebook page)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **After one year of increased visibility on military issues, the new NATO exercise in Romania was very discreet**, with lower impact than last year's activities (Saber Guardian and Noble Jump). NATO is not using these moments well enough to promote the message of strength in the region.
- **Most of the mentions regarding Sea Shield are in the traditional online press** (as compared to Facebook or other social networks or online sources). We've noticed a low visibility on traditional media (TV). The number of views in classic online media is higher than the views of mentions from any other source.
- Both the number of mentions of Sea Shield and the impact of those mentions are significantly lower compared to the number of mentions and the number of views relating to the two major NATO exercises from last year (Noble Jump and Saber Guardian). Last year, the greater interest was stimulated by the fact that the military exercises took place on land, and also by the public involvement / association of high-ranking officials from Romania - President Klaus IOHANNIS, for example.
- **Most mentions of Sea Shield were registered in early May, before the actual start of the exercise.** These are references about the official announcement of the military exercise, but also reports on the arrival of the warships belonging to the participating States.
 - One peak corresponded to the May 4 event of the interception by British aircraft of a Russian military plane, which allegedly was monitoring the exercise.
 - Other noticeable peaks occurred immediately after the military exercise.

- **The terms most associated with Sea Shield** are NATO, the Black Sea, the Romanian naval forces, Constanta or the names of some participating countries. We note the absence of an explicit association of the Sea Shield with the US.
- The posts with the greatest impact belong to the official Facebook account of the Romanian Naval Forces.
 - Also, media sources that have published high impact articles have built them based solely on the official information provided on the development of Sea Shield.
 - Similarly, information on the Russian airplane interceptions is based solely on what has been communicated by the officials.
- **In Romanian online media, there were no elements of criticism regarding NATO or, in particular, the military exercise which is the subject of this analysis**, in Facebook posts or articles with over 3000 views. Also, there were no mentions regarding the Russian Federation, other than those from official information regarding the plane issue.
- **However, it is worth noting that during the military exercise in the Black Sea, in the media space of the Republic of Moldova there were also alternative sources of negative news about NATO.** One of these sources was the president of the republic, Igor Dodon. Also during the same period, sources of Russian propaganda, such as Sputnik.md, published articles with titles such as "Russia has an advantage over NATO in Eastern Europe" or "The Black Sea is transformed from an economic zone into a strongly militarized one".

METHODOLOGY

The objective of the CPD study was to evaluate the way in which negative anti-NATO narratives were used in a visible way on this occasion to influence the Romanian public. We included in our monitoring the majority of online Romanian sources, analyzed with the help of a specialized software.

The current analysis is relevant for the period 01-22 May 2018, with data extracted using a special software to analyse online media in Romania. This is not survey data, but Big Data - information extracted from the online behavior of ALL WEB USERS in Romania.

As a result of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, starting April 6, 2018, Facebook has changed its policy with regard to data extraction rights through dedicated software. Therefore, among other rules, Facebook does not allow extraction of data from social network groups, because members of these groups are generally private individuals. This does not mean that their impact has disappeared, but that Facebook does not allow data extraction to be accounted for. Now only data extracted from official Facebook accounts (media institutions or public figures - including pages) is available.

To calculate as accurately as possible the actual number of views, we apply what we call Factor M - a calculation formula that includes the average views per mention based on past data.

During the analysis period, there were over 580 mentions of the Sea Shield military exercise.

We extracted a number of over 200 thousands mentions from all online media sources regarding NATO and its military exercises, in the last year, mentions which reached over 224 million people.

To clarify certain elements of context, necessary for the correct perception of this event's impact, we also used classic monitoring instruments, as well as comparative analysis of sociological data.

The monitoring period included several days in advance - approximately one week (to notice the way the participants' arrival in Romania was reflected) but also a few days after the exercise - approximately one week (to check the follow-up and the way the departure of the allied troops from Romania was reflected).

We chose to use a software to gather a large amount of data, in order to have a larger representation for Romanian online media. Here are some details about the software provided by ZeList, from their website:

<http://www.zelist.ro/monitor/overview?L=en>

About the software, we can mention that every week Zelist Monitor analyzes:

- over 86.000 Romanian blogs, with 2.500.000 posts and over 1.700.000 comments in the last year;
- over 298.000 Twitter accounts, with over 17.300.000 tweets posted in the last year;
- over 2.800 Romanian online publications, that have posted 6.000.000 articles in the last year;
- over 41.000 Facebook pages;
- over 790.000 Romanian Youtube accounts;
- over 190.000 Instagram accounts;
- over 1.100 LinkedIn groups;
- over 100.000 Google Plus accounts;
- over 60.000 Ask.fm accounts;
- over 93.000 Foursquare accounts;
- 119 of the most important Romanian forums.

About the demographic and geographical statistics

- The term "issuer" (source) is defined as the person/publication that in the study period published various types of social media content (articles/posts/tweets, etc.) in which reference was made to the monitored expression.
- There are two categories of issuers: issuers - persons (blog owners, Twitter account owners) and issuers - publications (online press, Facebook public pages and groups and forums). For the issuers - persons, we've analyzed demographics ("gender" variable and "age" variable) and geographical data. For issuers - publications (except forums), we've analyzed only geographical data.

About the viewership

- Viewership measures the number of potential visitors that go through a message. In terms of Online Advertising, Viewership is similar with the number of Impressions (displayed pages which contain an ad or a message). That is why Zelist Monitor also measures Viewership in Impressions.
- There are two Viewership categories:
 - a) Estimated Viewership of mentions;
 - b) Estimated Viewership of social media channels.
- The estimated Viewership of a mention represents an approximation of the number of potential readers that read that certain mention. It is, in other words, the universe of the potential users that can access a certain conversation about a certain message.
- The (estimated) Viewership for each mention is estimated with the help of an algorithm that combines a set of characteristic variables for the primary source with a set of variables specific to the secondary sources.
- The variables specific to the primary source are: the medium number of visitors for a blog, the typology of the blog, its rank in top Zelist, estimated average traffic based on their position in Zelist Top, corroborated with the medium traffic reported by Trafic.ro.
- The term "secondary sources" refers to the takeover and spread of advertising messages by primary sources on blogs, Twitter or Facebook.



- The variables of the secondary sources that are a part of the computing algorithm are: the number of potential visitors generated by each takeover and by the importance of the secondary source (be that its rank on Zelist, the number of Twitter followers and the number of fans/members on Facebook).
- In that which concerns takeovers and the dissemination of messages on Facebook, we take into account the degree of interaction of that message on the page on which it was posted on, related to the total number of fans/members.

The impact

- The impact of a mention refers to the impact of its exposure on a large number of visitors. This is tightly connected with the estimated viewership and is expressed on a 5 step scale, starting with very weak, weak, medium and reaching strong and very strong. ZeList considers a mention to have a very strong impact if the estimated viewership is over 6.000 IMP, a strong impact if the estimated viewership is between 2.501 and 6.000, a medium impact if the estimated viewership is between 1.001 and 2.500 IMP, a weak impact if the estimated viewership is between 501 and 1.000 IMP and a very weak impact if the estimated viewership is under 500 IMP.
- Zelist Monitor currently monitors the most important aggregators in Romania: ziarelive.ro, info-ziare.ro, ziare.com, etc. Also, ZeList considers that the online impact of the mentions is more important than the actual number of mentions, number that can be artificially increased in a short period.



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THE SOCIOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF NATO EXERCISES IN ROMANIA

Romania is a country in which the level of trust in NATO is very high. Also, in our country, the highest level of trust in institutions is directed towards traditional and force institutions: the Army, the Church, the police, the intelligence services, as well as the main international institutions where Romania is affiliated: NATO and the European Union. See below an evolution of trust in NATO (blue), the US (yellow) and Russia (red). You can notice a strong position for NATO levels of trust, and a low position for trust in Russia.

Trust in NATO has been constantly high. After 2000, during the period when Romania became part of NATO, the trust level was always over 60%. A slight erosion at the beginning of the next decade followed, with a decline towards 50%. The return to a higher level of trust in NATO (over 60%) has happened since 2011, in the same context of an increase in tensions in neighboring regions. There is a tight correlation with the trust in EU.

For the US, after a short and unexpected decline, last year (after the Presidential elections in the US, but also after some negative narratives promoted in Romania regarding the relationship between the two countries) the trend is starting to be a positive one again.

For Russia – the levels of trust are low, and steady. As a comparison, the Romanians’ trust in the Russian Federation declined from 20% in 2012 to 10% as a result of the events in the region. **Russia is, by far, the country Romanians trust the least.**

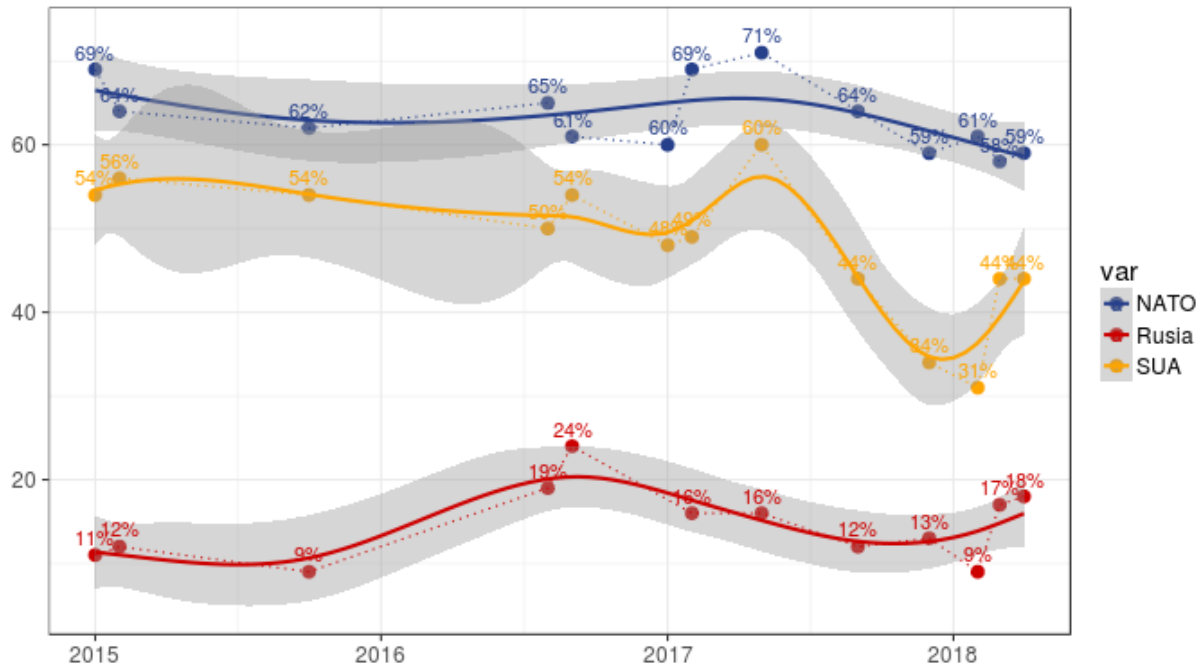


Figure 1 Survey data, CPD

SEA SHIELD. Number of mentions and impact, by source type

Although the most mentions are recorded in news aggregators, their impact (number of views) is actually insignificant. The most important are the mentions in the online media and on Facebook. Mentions in online media are over twice as many as on Facebook.

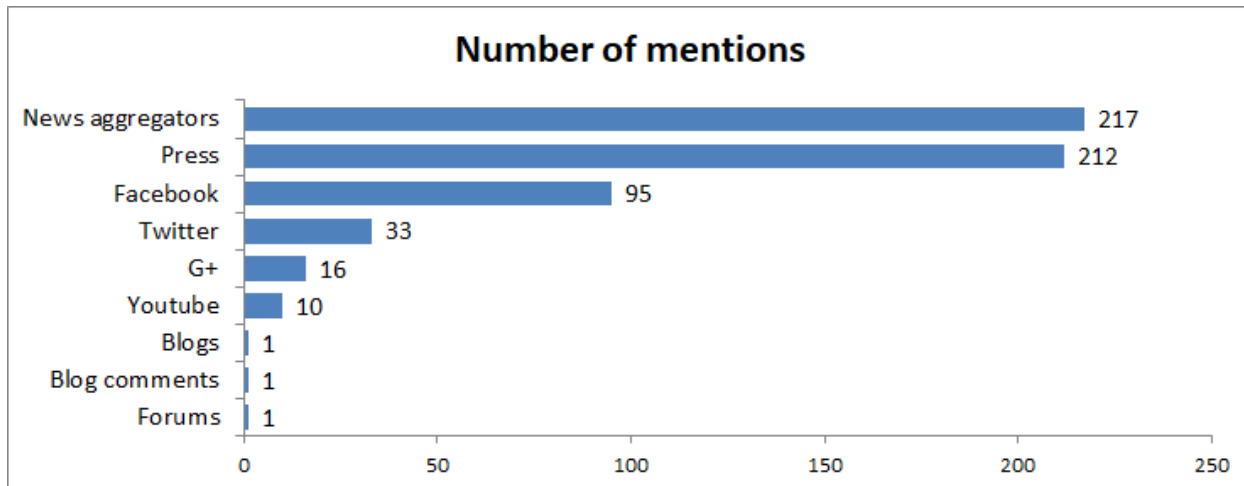


Figure 2 Sea Shield - number of mentions, by source type

The high impact of online media mentions is very clear in the chart below. The rest of the sources are irrelevant in terms of the number of views per mention.

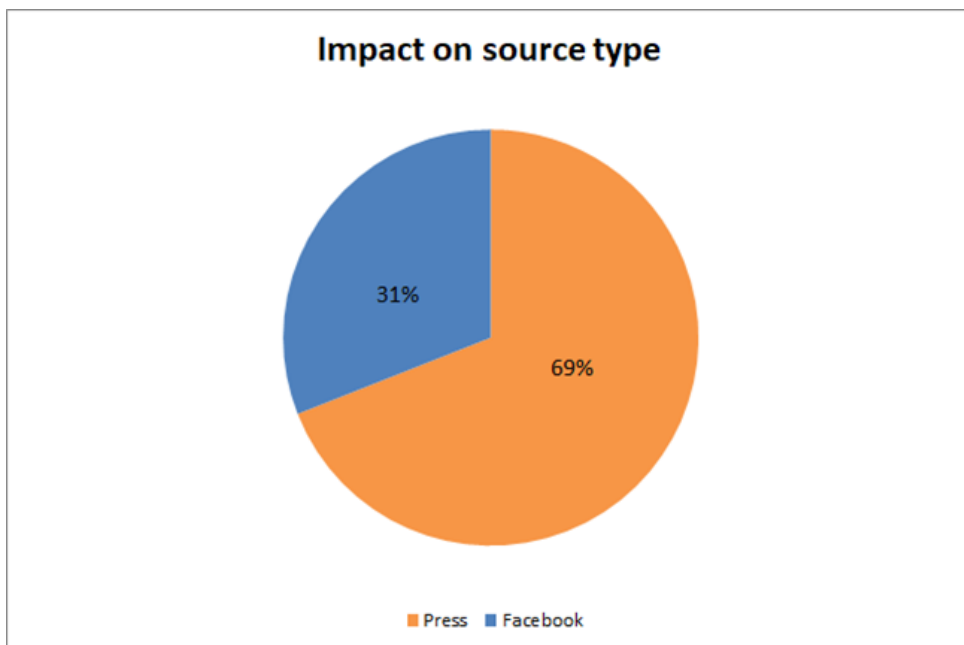


Figure 3 Sea Shield - impact: Press vs Facebook

Sea Shield – TIMELINE

Most mentions of Sea Shield are from early May, before the actual start of the exercise. These are references to the official announcement of the exercise, but also reports on the arrival of the warships belonging to the participating states.

On May 4 British aircraft intercepted a Russian military plane.

The other noticeable peaks occurred at the end of Sea Shield.

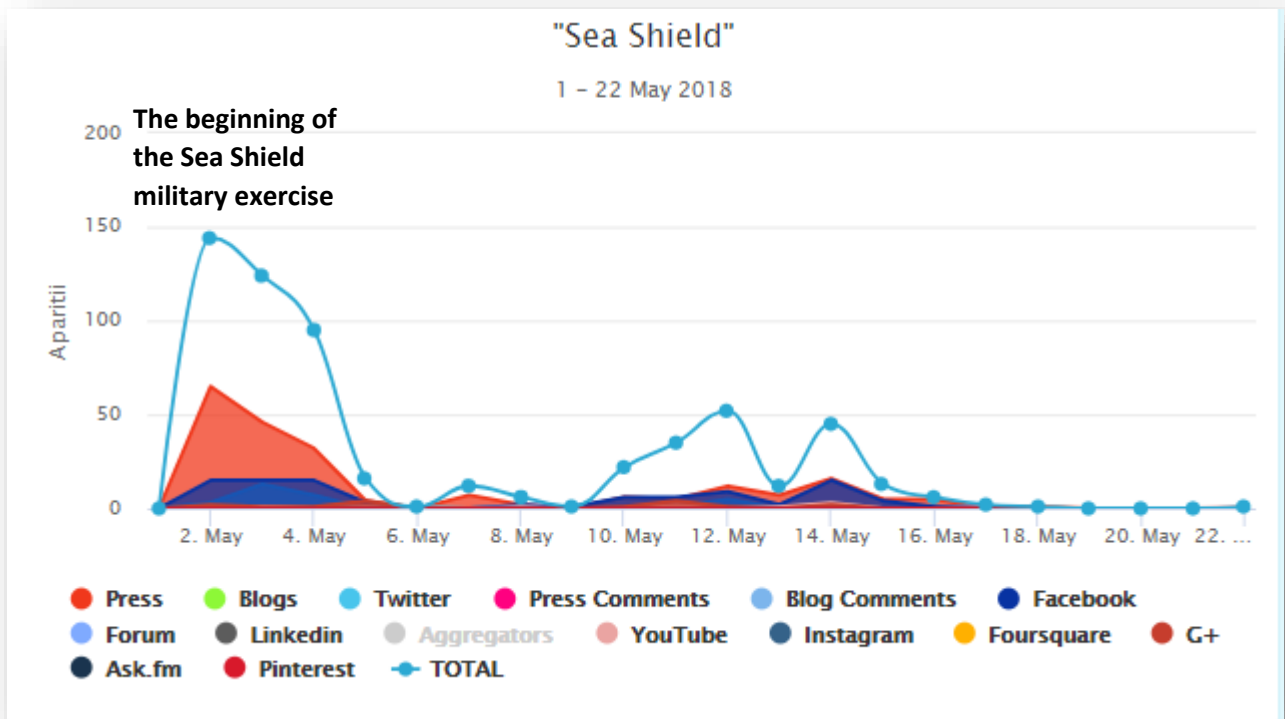


Figure 4 Sea Shield - timeline

Sea Shield - terms associated with the mentions

Most of the terms associated with Sea Shield are NATO, the Black Sea, the Romanian naval forces, Constanta or the names of some participating countries. We note the absence of an explicit association of Sea Shield with the US.

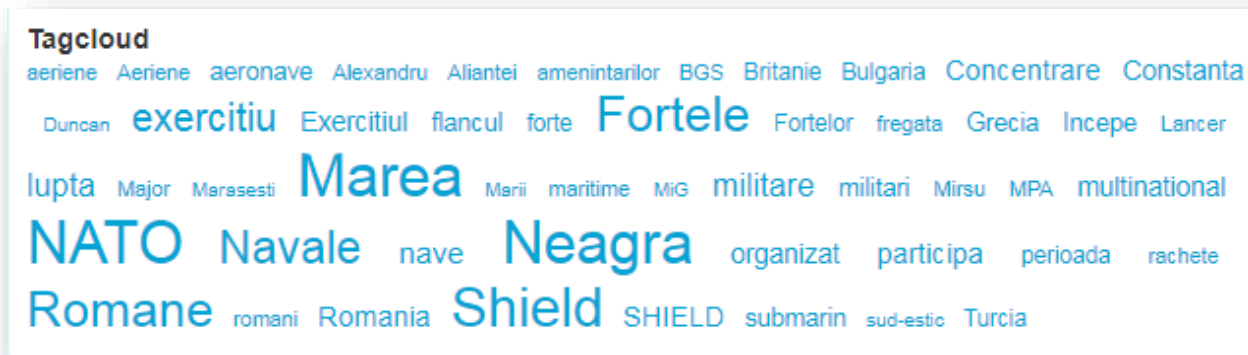


Figure 5 Sea Shield - associated terms

Sea Shield - Online media sources that have published most articles about the military exercise (30 days)

Most online media that mentioned Sea Shield in articles are the mainstream press from Romania. The articles focused primarily on the official information provided in connection with the Black Sea military exercise.

Press	Posts
+ ziuanevs.ro	9
+ adevarul.ro	8
+ tracknews.ro	8
+ caleaeuropeana.ro	6
+ replicaonline.ro	5
+ armataromaniei.ro	5
+ ziuconstanta.ro	5
+ agerpres.ro	4
+ radiometafora.ro	4
+ romania-actualitati.ro	4
+ intro.news	4
+ rador.ro	3
+ gandul.info	3
+ orange.ro/stiri	3
+ hotnews.ro	3
+ telegrafonline.ro	3
+ reportertv.ro	3
+ romaniatv.net	3
+ cugetliber.ro	3
+ medifax.ro	3
+ ziare.com	3
+ evz.ro	3
+ business24.ro	3
+ dcnews.ro	3
+ ordinea.ro	2
+ stiri-zilnic.ro	2
+ romanialibera.ro	2
+ nineoclock.ro	2
+ jurnalulbtd.ro	2
+ stiripesurse.ro	2
+ publika.md	2
+ radioconstanta.ro	2
+ ziarulevenimentul.ro	2
+ promptmedia.ro	2
+ tvdobrogea.ro	2
+ zf.ro	2
+ andrei244.wordpress.com	2
+ money.ro	2
+ ziarulprofit.ro	2
+ tomisnews.ro	2
+ politics.md	2

Figure 6 Online media – Top - number of articles

COMPARISONS - NATO exercises

Sea Shield vs. Noble Jump vs. Saber Guardian. Total number of views

The biggest impact was registered by mentions of the Saber Guardian exercise.

This is understandable, given the involvement of President IOHANNIS, but also the more intense media coverage.

The mentions of Noble Jump also had a high impact, by comparison to those of Sea Shield.

Both Noble Jump and Saber Guardian were land-based military exercises, and their visibility was also influenced by specific, local context-related elements such as the official information on traffic congestion on national roads in Romania.

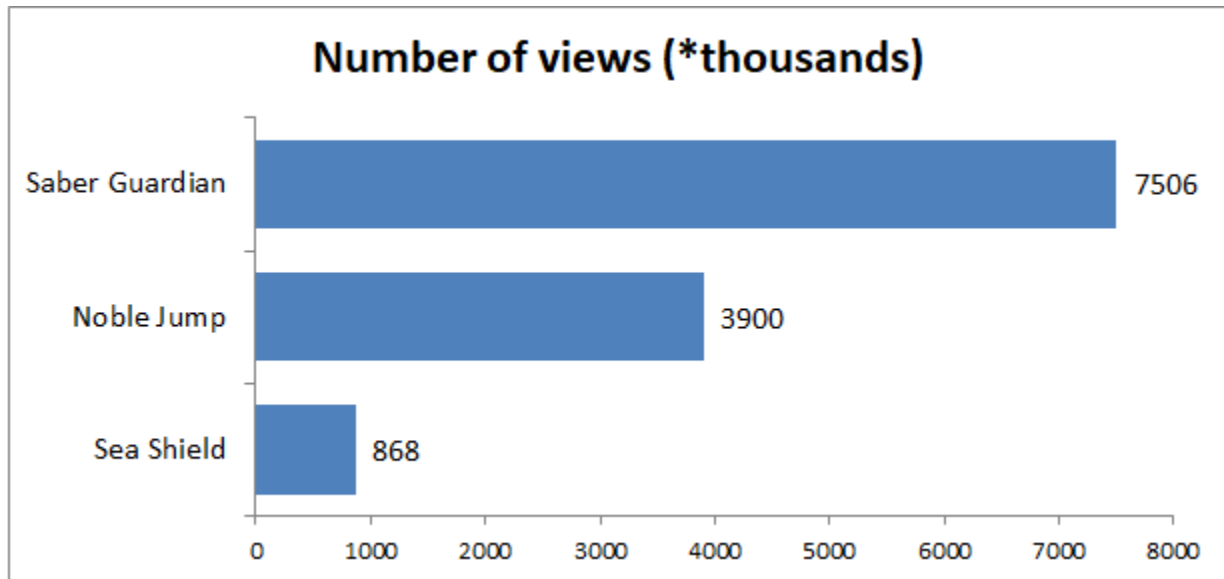


Figure 7 NATO exercises - total views

Sea Shield vs. Noble Jump vs. Saber Guardian - Timeline - Mentions in Online Press

As shown in the graph below, the number of Sea Shield mentions is significantly lower compared to the number of mentions of the two major NATO exercises that took place last year.

This is a step back from last year. For NATO, this year could have bring some positive visibility, compared with last year.

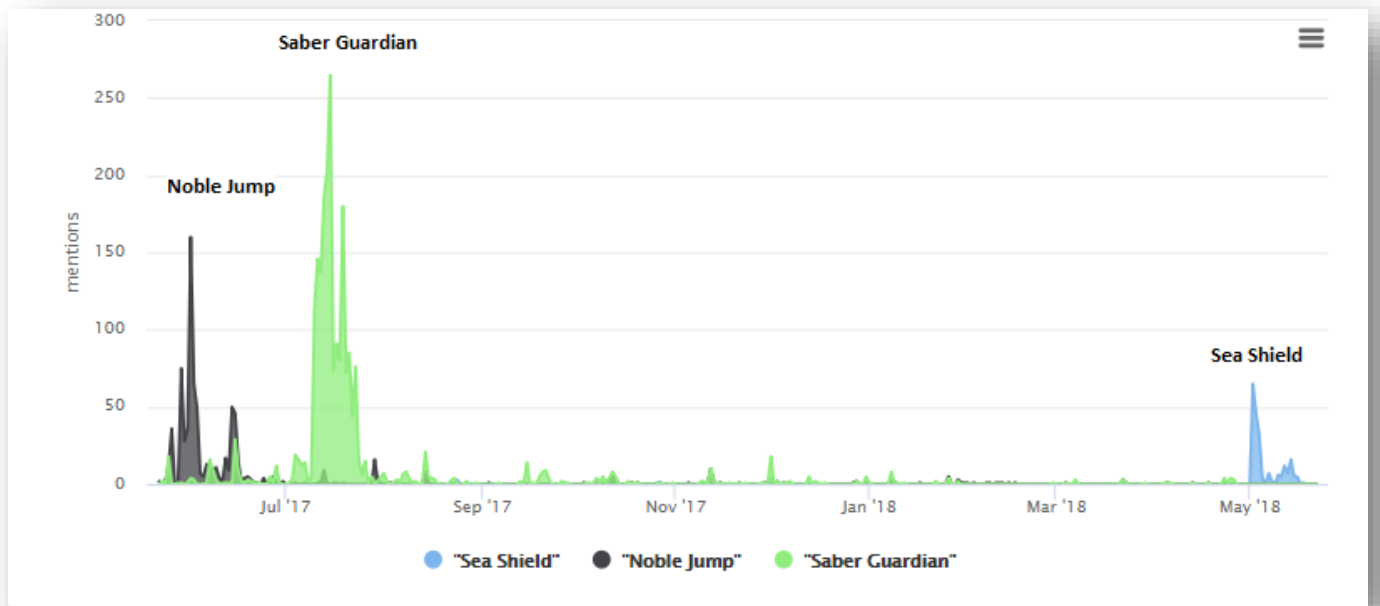


Figure 8 Comparisons - mentions (online media)

Sea Shield vs. Noble Jump vs. Saber Guardian – Timeline - Mentions on Facebook

In the case of Facebook mentions, we notice the same differences as in the case of online media. However, although Facebook no longer allows the extraction of data from groups (so this type of exposure is not included in the analysis for Sea Shield), we can say that the number of mentions of the Sea Shield military exercise is still significant (about a third of the visibility gained by Noble Jump).

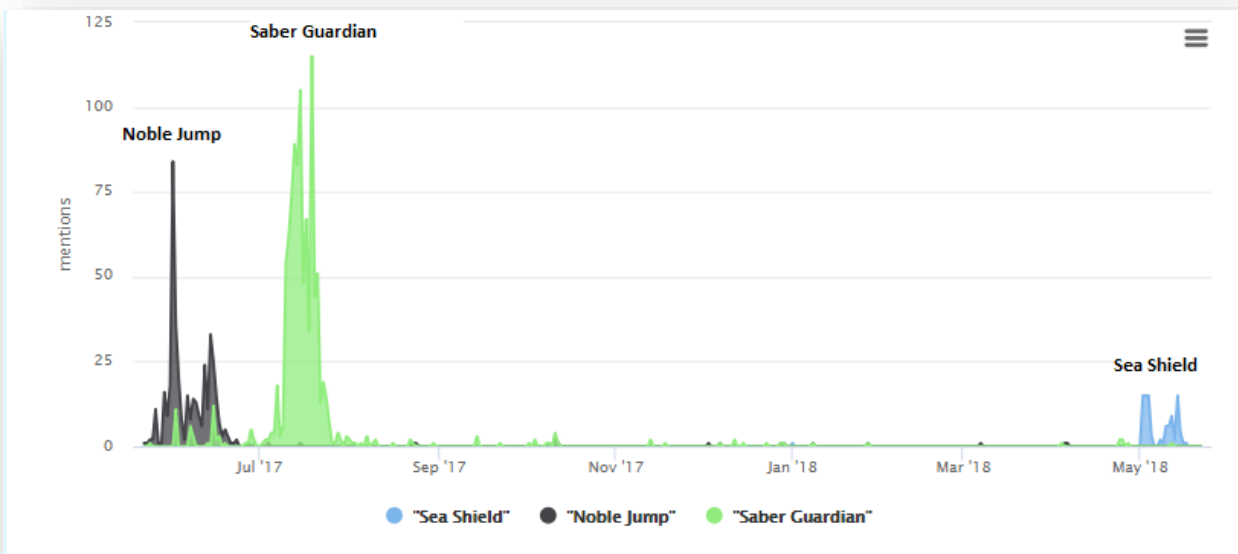


Figure 9 Timeline - mentions (Facebook)

Sea Shield vs NATO. Timeline – mentions

As you can see, the number of NATO mentions in online media and social networks is much higher than that of Sea Shield. This is normal, given that the term NATO can occur in relation to a broader range of issues.

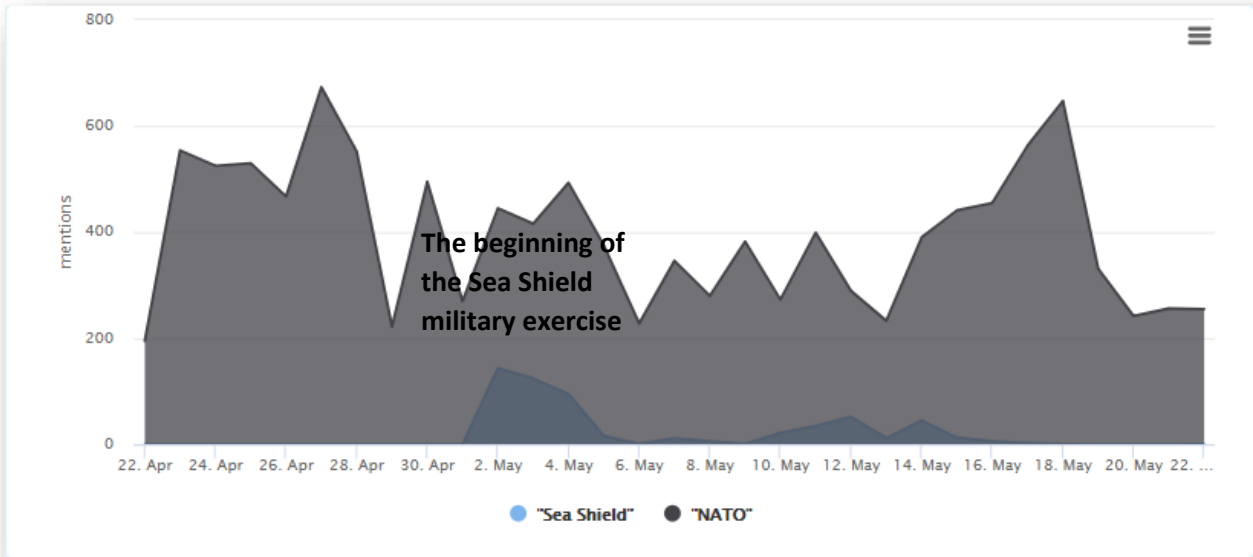


Figure 10 Sea Shield vs NATO - Timeline - mentions

NATO vs USA vs Russia. Timeline – mentions: in the context of the Sea Shield military exercise

Most mentions are recorded by the US. Russia comes second. Mentions of NATO are significantly lower in number than those of US or Russia.

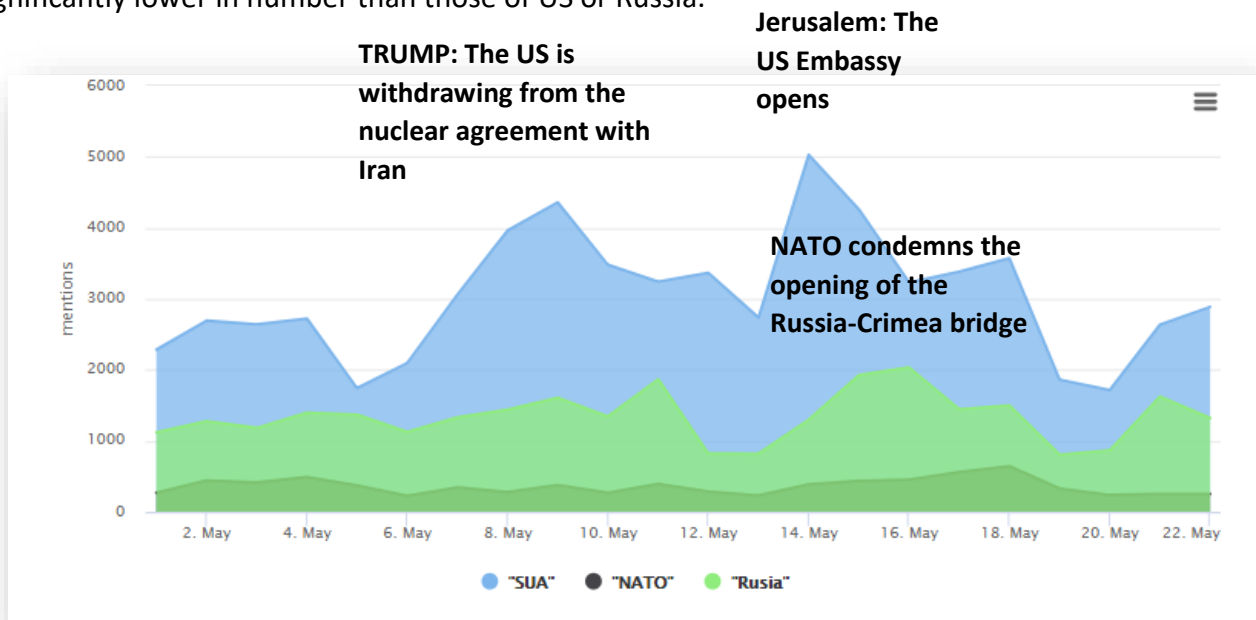


Figure 11 NATO vs USA vs Russia. Timeline: mentions

NATO vs USA vs Russia. Timeline: mentions - 1 year

As shown below, in all three cases the number of mentions mostly had a steady rhythm. Over the course of a year, the US and Russia registered more mentions than NATO. Most mentions of NATO were recorded at the time of the Summits, and not during military exercises.

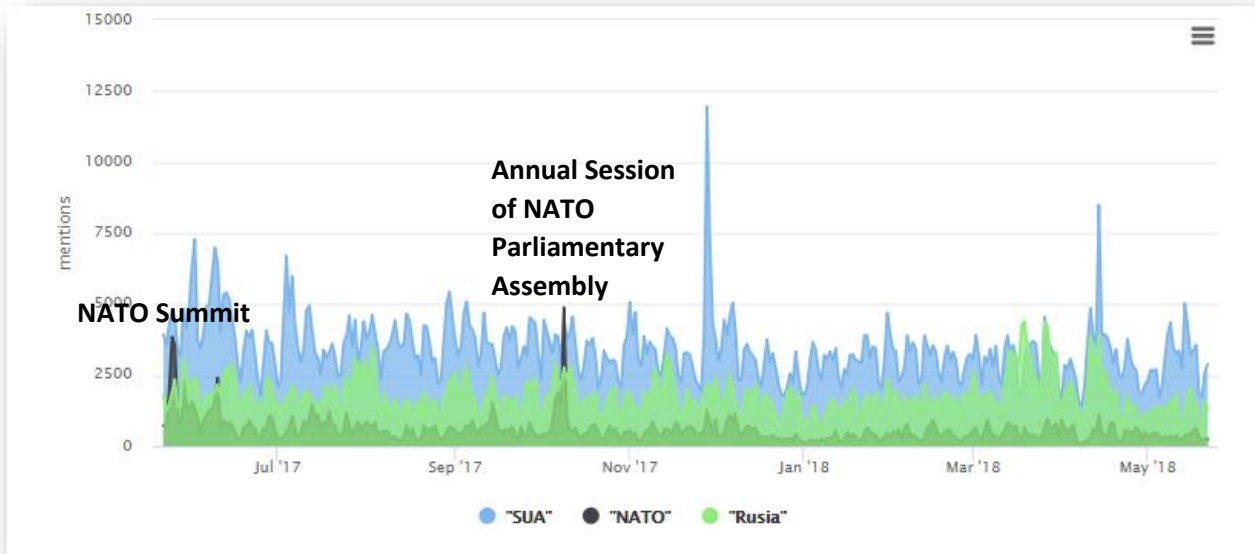


Figure 12 NATO vs USA vs Russia. Timeline: mentions. 1 year

Google Trends.

Sea Shield vs Saber Guardian vs Noble Jump

As shown below, there were explicit searches on Google for the terms Noble Jump and Saber Guardian. This is not the case with Sea Shield. This may indicate that the public was not familiar with the name of the Black Sea military exercise, even though there was interest for it (although obviously lower than in the cases of Saber Guardian and Noble Jump).

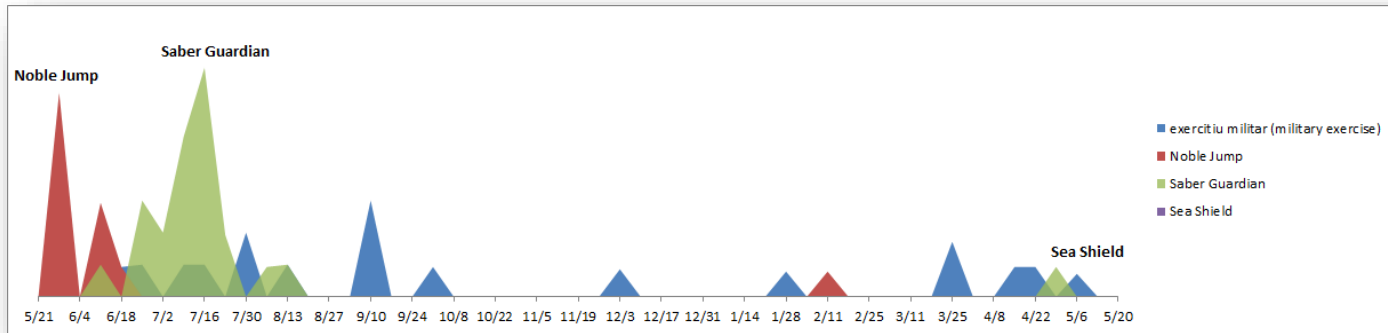


Figure 13 Google Trends. Sea Shield vs Saber Guardian vs Noble Jump - last year

NATO vs SUA vs Russia. 1 Year

As we have seen, the United States records the most mentions in Romanian online media and on the social networks compared to the other two terms. As for Google Trends, the Russian Federation generates the highest interest (the presidential election in Russia has generated the highest interest in the last 12 months).

The number of Google searches for the three terms was constant for the entire period (with a sole exception – the peak in the graph below, corresponding to the Russian elections), which indicates that NATO's military exercises do not significantly alter the search trends on Google.

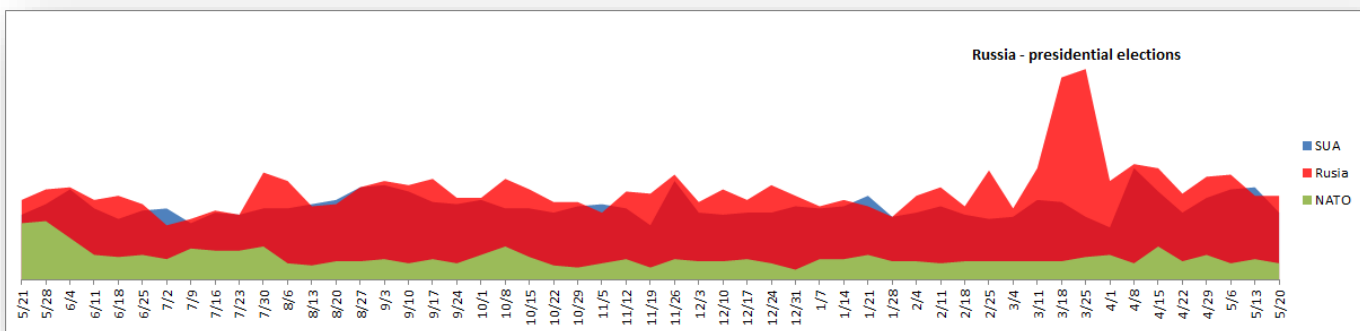


Figure 14 Google Trends. NATO vs Russia vs USA – last year

Sea Shield and Russian propaganda in the Republic of Moldova

NATO's naval exercise in the Black Sea also benefited from exposure in Moldovan media, where Russia's influence is much higher (compared to Romania), and Kremlin's propaganda is more intense. As expected, the event was not very visible, but there were online media sources that broadcast information from the official communication of the Defense ministry in a neutral or slightly positive manner.



Figure 15 Sea Shield - in Moldovan press

It is worth noting, however, that during the military exercise in the Black Sea, in the media space of the Republic of Moldova there were also alternative sources of news about NATO. One of these sources was the president of the republic, Igor Dodon, who, during a broadcast on Russian TV station Zvezda, declared that he planned to close the NATO Liaison Office in Chisinau: "From 2017, when I was in Brussels, I told them not to open this NATO Connecting Center, because we will come to power and we will close it." In the same interview, Dodon categorically rejected the possibility of establishing NATO bases in Moldova.

Also during the same period, sources of Russian propaganda, such as Sputnik.md, published articles with titles such as "Russia has an advantage over NATO in Eastern Europe" or "The Black Sea is transformed from an economic zone into a strongly militarized one", both press materials

invoking “expert” sources - "the authors of a report of the US Military Academy in West Point" in the first case and an expert - PhD in history, in the second case.



Figure 16 Sputnik - on NATO-Russia relation



CONCLUSIONS

The Sea Shield military exercise was conducted without the involvement of visible Romanian political actors. This time, high-rank officials (ministers, the President) didn't communicate about the exercise or didn't attend. As proven during the Saber Guardian exercise, such involvement can bring a substantial increase in media coverage.

It must also be pointed out that the Sea Shield military exercise took place during the intensification of the internal political debate, which has diminished the general interest towards other subjects.

A positive aspect we noticed is that, unlike in the cases of the Noble Jump or Saber Guardian, the negative narratives were missing.

Nevertheless, the limited visibility of Sea Shield also meant a missed opportunity to promote a useful topic for the pro-NATO public in Romania, which is the majority.

We note that this relatively low media exposure of Sea Shield happens while, on the international scene, much is being discussed about the importance of NATO in the context of the current relationship between the US and the European Union.

Authors: Adrian-Emil **Constantin**, Daniel **Buti** (CPD experts)

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ANNEXES

We note that the most influential posts belong to the official Facebook account of the Romanian Navy. Also, media sources that have published high-impact materials built their articles based solely on the official information provided on the development of Sea Shield. Even the articles on the Russian airplane interception are based solely on what has been communicated by the officials.

There are no elements of criticism of NATO or, in particular, of the military exercise that is the subject of this analysis, in Facebook posts or articles with over 3000 views. Also, issues related to the Russian Federation are not present, other than those from official information.

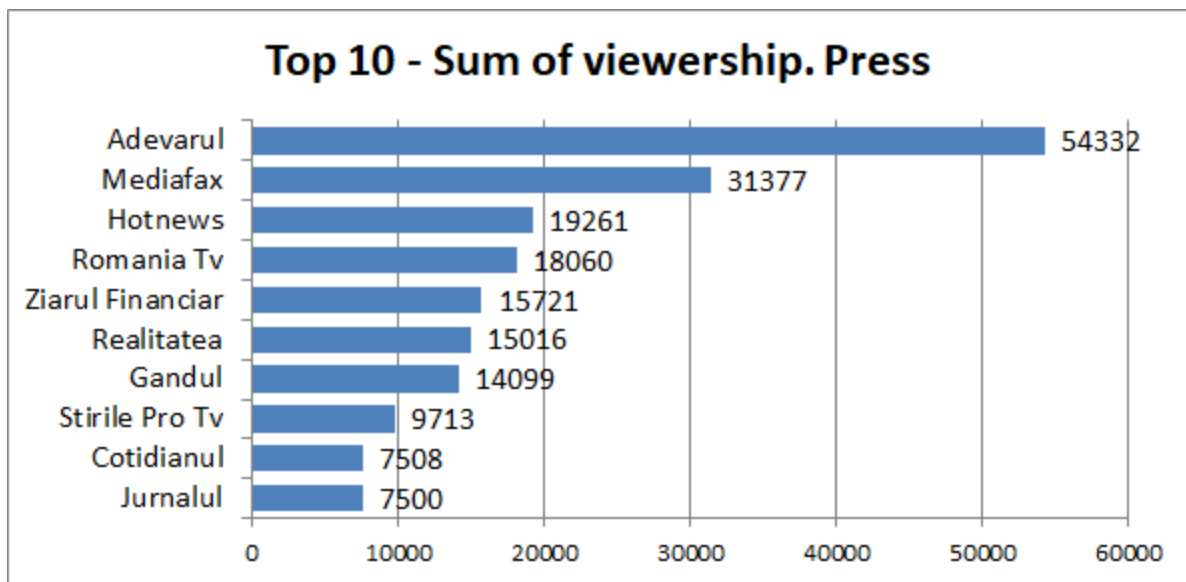


Figure 17 Top 10. Sum of viewership. Press sources with the highest impact

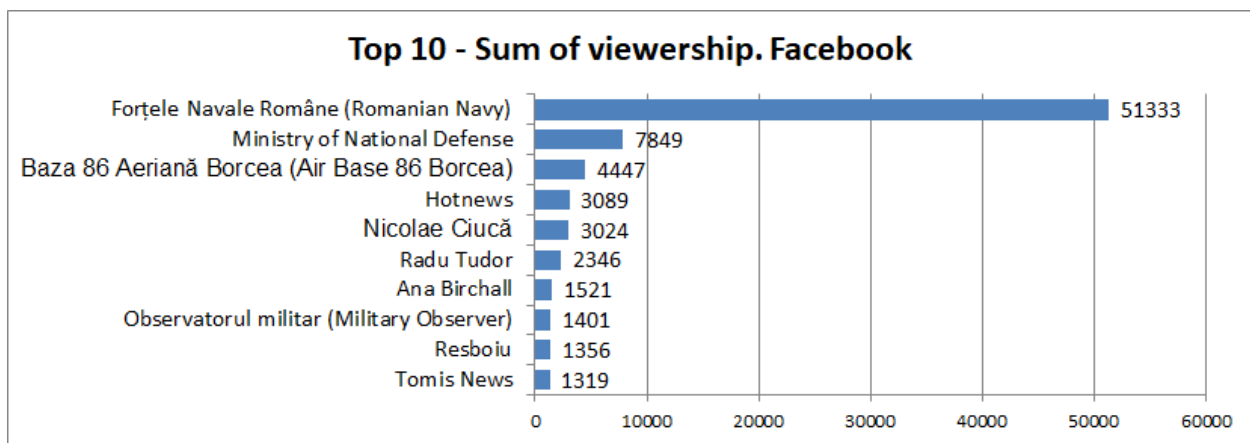


Figure 18 Sum of viewership. Facebook accounts with the highest impact

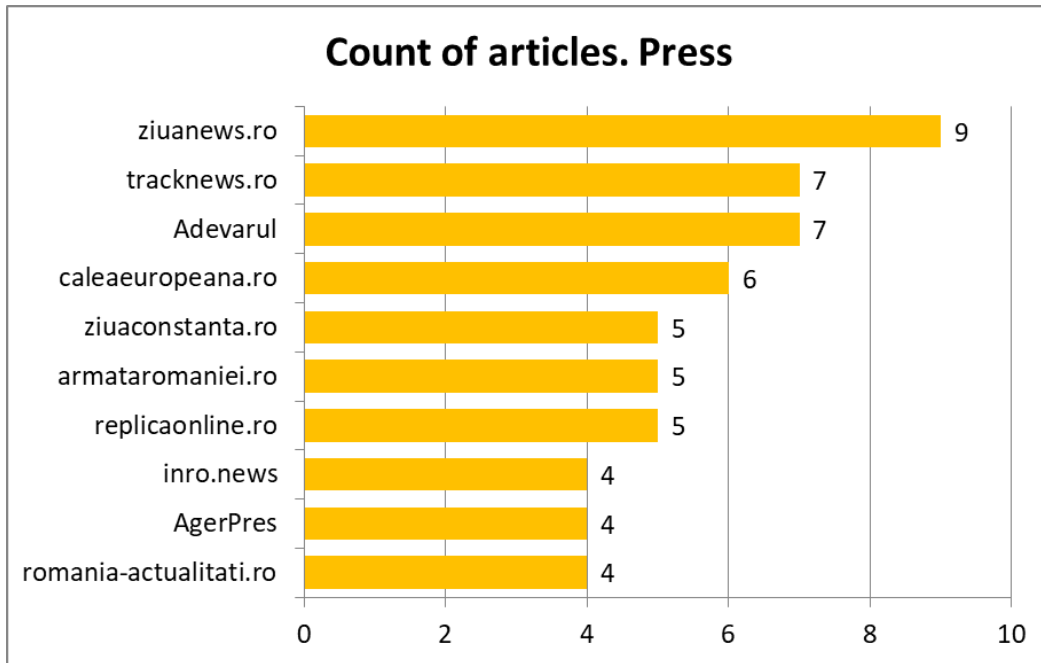


Figure 19 Top 10 Press. Number of articles

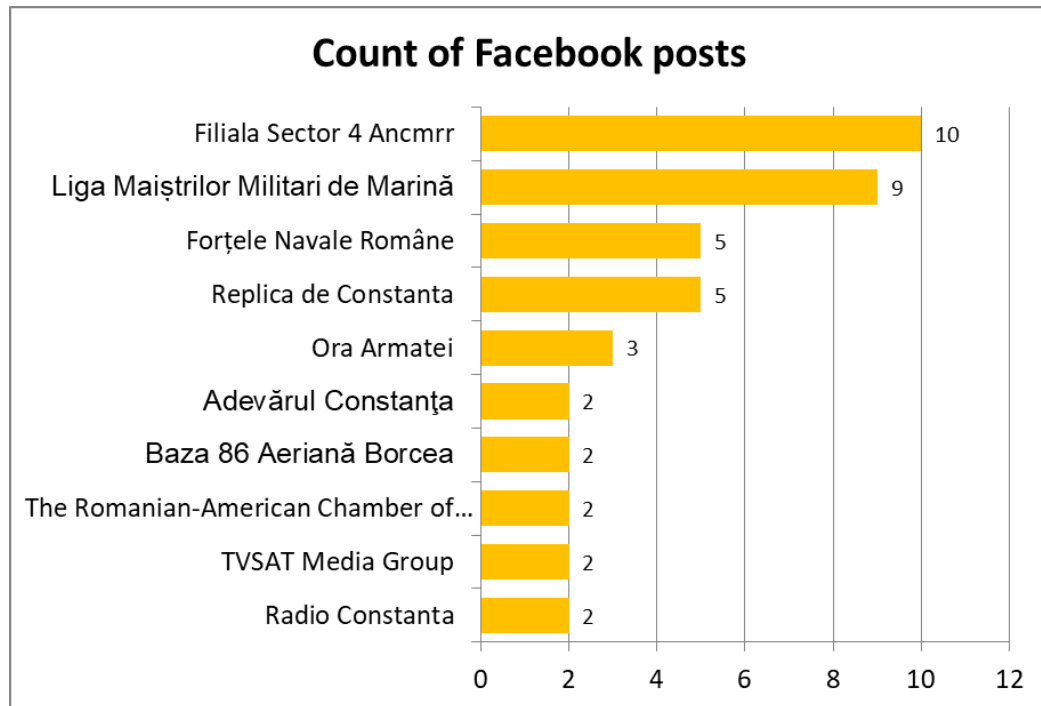


Figure 20 Top 10 Facebook. Number of posts