

Digitization of Pre-election Messages during the 2021 Parliamentary Campaign in Bulgaria

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ABSTRACT

The pre-election campaign for the 45th Parliament in Bulgaria on April 4, 2021 was held in social distance and strict observance of anti-epidemic measures against COVID-19. Internet platforms have become increasingly popular channels for politicians to communicate with their constituents. The aim of this study focuses on the dynamics of online pre-election political communication. The object is the specifics of the internet connection between the digital audiences and the MP candidates during the campaign. The subject refers to the digital election messages of the political party leaders in their Facebook profiles. The methodology is an empirical study and comparative analysis. The scope includes those political forces, which passed the 4% threshold. The results are indicative to those interested in digital political communication.

Keywords: Digitalization, Political Communication, Pre-election Messages, Social Networks Audiences

INTRODUCTION

The pre-election campaigns in Bulgaria during the period of democratization since 1989 have developed alongside transformation of the media system, giving way to the rise of two mutually bound processes – politicization of media and mediatization of politics [1]. The high-speed spread of the online platforms enhanced the burst of social movements, instigated by the growing inequality. Bulgaria quickly joined the global protest developments, which shared a common autonomous digital network basis, supported by the Internet and wireless communication. Manuel Castells called these movements “evolution of liberty and dignity” [2].

The protesters in Bulgaria followed this digital pattern – they gathered horizontally through decentralized social networks and acted in a direct, participatory democracy of equals. Thus, spontaneously organized (thanks to the social networks) the mass protests have managed to redefine the communication processes. Internet enabled activists to plan, plot and co-ordinate the protests at low costs, anonymity and speed. Traditional mainstream media, especially radio and TV, were lagging dramatically behind in the high-speed race for consumers’ attention [3].

Thus, nourishing ground for rigorous development of populism as a political concept and rhetorical style has been created. Nowadays the political environment in Bulgaria is characterized by almost permanent merge of political entities, which gradually escalates the usage of populist approaches, styles and rhetoric by all political parties in the country, whether left or right-oriented. In the last decade, some of the newly formed populist parties have gradually won considerable numbers of seats in the national Parliament and were represented in the European Parliament as well. The strong critical attitude of populists towards the status quo, and towards what they regard as the chimera of democracy, is generally intertwined with the function of the media as a corrective factor with regard to government authorities. The growing impact of social networks on the process of communication between society and political leaders points out the reasonable assumption that this model of interaction will rigorously develop, especially in times of social isolation, such as the COVID-19 pandemic has caused. That is why it is of particular importance to outline the trends and the peculiarities of the developments of these online relationships.

BULGARIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF 2021

The elections for national Parliament’2021 were held in a situation of global insecurity in spheres such as healthcare, economy, social life, etc. Besides, in the summer of 2020 street protests broke out in the country with a variety of demands, such as: convening a Grand National Assembly for reforming of the Bulgarian Constitution; lustration of former communists in power; modernization of the administration; sustaining the greater freedom of speech, etc. The accumulated negative public energy was pointed out mainly at the fight with corruption and the need for judicial reform. The protesters called for immediate resignation of the running Government and the Prosecutor general and for summoning early elections. The President of the country supported the unrest. Despite the challenges of the

COVID-19 infection, the protesters started to block on daily basis key intersections in the capital and some other cities in the country, thus hindering the normal functioning of the urban environment. They also kept throwing tomatoes, eggs and fish against government buildings. The Diaspora also supported national demonstrations. The protests were mostly rhizomatic, although they were coordinated by the so-called “Poisonous trio” (consisted of a journalist, sculptor and lawyer) and backed by an oligarch with a number of legal allegations, who has fled from the country. In attempt to brush-up their image, some non-parliamentary represented politicians rubbed shoulders with the demonstrators. The protesters, no matter that some of their demands were reasonable, could not formulate clear constructive goals and could not nominate a charismatic and competent person as a leader to unite the nation. On the contrary, the motivation of the non-protesters to state their disagreement with the public discontent was related to their skepticism about the ability of any alternative to the ruling political party to change the status quo in the system. The protests lasted until October 2020 and led to the resignation of five ministers. Despite the political insecurity, the Government accomplished its term.

Among the main reasons for the public dissatisfaction with the government was the accumulated fatigue from the ruling of the three cabinets with the leading participation of the center-right *Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria* (2009-2013, 2014-2016, and 2017-2021), as well as with the loss of trust in the state institutions. Indeed, its last led government has achieved certain success in: handling of the coronavirus crisis; sustaining good macroeconomic indicators and infrastructure modernization; managing the migrant crisis; increasing the country's international outlook, etc. However, the Parliamentary opposition and the protesters' allegations that this political party did not resolutely fight corruption and did not put much effort to defend the rule of law, have helped to form a prevailing critical attitude towards it.

The tense relation between the prime minister and the president further polarized the political environment. Shortly before the elections some new parties and coalitions were established, mainly by former high-ranking public officials and by participants in the street protests. Candidates from 67 political formations, organized in 19 political parties and 11 coalitions run for the 240 seats in the National Parliament. MPs from 2 political parties and 4 coalitions, representing 20 political entities were elected. From the former political forces only the *Movement for Rights and Freedoms* improved its results by gaining 4 seats. *Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria* lost 20 seats and *Bulgarian Socialist Party for Bulgaria* Coalition – 37. The nationalist coalitions, such as the *United Patriots* and *Will* suffered from splits and lost their representation in the new Parliament.

Voter turnout in the country was 50.61%. The election apathy somehow displaced the initial political euphoria in society – a definitely protest vote of the Bulgarians against the political class. Besides, 47 749 out of 3 334 283 voters did not support any of the candidates. Bulgarian voters refused to yield to any mass media, political and sociological propaganda, especially when dished out along negative lines.

According to the Preliminary Standpoint of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) fundamental freedoms were respected in the election [4].

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study focuses on the dynamics of online Parliamentary'2021 pre-election communication between politicians and society in the context of the COVID-19 restrictions in Bulgaria. The object is the specifics of the internet connection between the digital audiences and the MP candidates during the one-month (05.03.21-03.04.21) pre-election campaign. The subject of the research refers to the digital election messages of the political party leaders, presented in their Facebook profiles. The scope of the study includes those political forces, which passed the 4% threshold.

The study examines the verbal and non-verbal communication of the MP candidates, the quality of their messages in terms of positivity, negativity or neutrality, as well as their commitment to social, health, economic, technological and other important topics related to the welfare of the population in the country as an EU member-state. The frequency of the usage of Facebook by the political leaders, the issues that dominate their messages, and the digital activity of the audiences are also tracked.

CONCLUSIONS

The extraordinary health situation caused by the COVID-19 epidemic has marked the conduct of the pre-election campaign. Mass events, door-to-door and in-person activities were restricted, so the political parties focused their efforts on the usage of traditional media and online platforms for their campaigning. All campaign materials contained a sign that vote buying and selling is a criminal offence was also observed.

Media. Data from the monitoring of the Institute for Public Environment Development show that the 2021 campaign for a national Parliament costs over BGN 4 mln. and is more expensive than those in 2014 and 2017 [5]. However, despite the investment and the availability of their own TV stations, some parliamentary-represented political forces, such as the *Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Bulgarian National Movement* (TV Bulgaria 24), the *National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria* (TV SKAT), and *Attack* (TV Alpha), lost the race. Although it possesses own TV station (BSTV), the *Bulgarian Socialist Party for Bulgaria* Coalition significantly reduced its parliamentary presence. However, the newcomer – the *There Is Such a People* political party, based on the long-term engagement of its leader as TV anchor and owner of TV 7/8, became the second political force.

OSCE noted that media lacked analytical reporting, affecting the ability of voters to make an informed choice. It also found that in the pre-election campaign television remained the main source of political information, followed by the online media. Indeed, a combined viewership of over 64 per cent belongs to two private TV networks (bTV and Nova), which hold over 85 per cent of all TV advertisement revenue. Nova operates the largest digital media company of over ten major news-websites. In comparison, the better trusted public Bulgarian National Television is insignificant [4].

A study by the Southeast Europe Media Program of Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Alpha Research Sociological Agency confirmed the dominant role of television as a leading source of political information. Almost half of Bulgarians believe that the parties have informed them about their political programs poorly. This opinion is present in all age groups, all levels of education and every type of settlement [6].

Online communication. Facebook is the main social network in the country. That is why some election participants relied heavily on their Facebook presence. The contestants actively used the Facebook platform to promote their posts. Although online platforms became an important source of information, a popular understanding exists that journalism is needed to mediate between politicians and citizens [6].

Following the aim of this study, the research team investigated the Facebook profiles of the political party leaders, that passed the 4% threshold.

Despite the negativism, the conservative **coalition *Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria-Union of Democratic Forces*** won 26.18 % and the most seats – 75, representing 837,707 voters. Its slogan was “Work, Work, Work”. The party's leader and prime minister, Boyko Borissov, is extremely active on Facebook (nearly 305,000 followers) with 197 posts - on average about 6.35 posts a day. On election day, he has 5 publications: thanking voters for their support; visit to Monastery, renovated by his government; criticism to President Rumen Radev for appointing an inappropriate date for the election - at the peak of the third COVID-19 wave and during the Catholic Easter holidays; analysis of election results live. 118 posts contained video (live streaming). Almost all of them present the scope of the work performed by his government. Some European leaders declare their support for Borissov. Photographs accompany the other 79 publications. Overall, the rational, pragmatic campaign is leading in the Prime Minister's Facebook page. He is trying to play the role of a unifier of the nation (“We leave our opponents to lead the black campaign. We will continue to build schools and temples in all settlements and, as always, we will not divide them on a party basis. When there are jobs, modernized infrastructure and improved living conditions - Christians and Muslims will live in a spirit of understanding”, he says in a March 20 post.

On second place with 17.66 % and 51 seats, representing 565,014 voters, is ranked the new ***There Is Such a People*** – a populist big tent political party established by the Bulgarian popular long time TV entertainer Stanislav (Slavi) Trifonov. The party is named after one of his musical albums. His rise actually continues a trend in both Europe and the United States: television and show business stars are entering politics, such as US Donald Trump, Italian Beppe Grillo, Ukrainian Volodymyr Zelensky, Slovenian Marian Sharec, etc. “The Decisive Vote Is You” became the pre-election slogan of the party. Trifonov relies rather on emotions. He does not make an active online campaign in his profile – out of a total of 18 posts on his page, 9 are videos, five of which broadcasted live. Trifonov's declaration of March 9, that he will not take the money for a media package provided for under the Electoral Code, and that he will propose a subsidy of only BGN 1 per vote when entering Parliament, as expressed in the referendum he initiated, receives 46,000 likes, over 6,000 comments and over 3,000 shares. The general conclusion is that Slavi Trifonov's campaign focuses on the position of “anti-status quo”, against fear, the importance of people's opinions, and patriotism.

The ***Bulgarian Socialist Party*** suffered from contradictions within the party between its leader Korneliya Ninova and various fractions. The coalition gradually has departed from its

clear-cut social democratic left profile, combining five political formations, ranging from communism and nationalism to environmentalism. Although the slogan of the **coalition Bulgarian Socialist Party for Bulgaria** is “With Care to People”, it records its worst ever result in a democratic election and ranks as third political force with 15.01% and 43 seats, representing 480,146 voters. The Facebook profile of the leader Korneliya Ninova is moderate in intensity - 1 to 8 posts per day. The total number of all publications is 75, with hundreds of comments (positive and negative). Photos accompany most of the texts – 46. The video materials are much less - only 11, and a small part of them are live. The published 7 advertising posters are dedicated to different topics. Ninova is trying to involve the society in a common cause, saying, "It depends on all of us", "Together we will succeed", etc. However, often addressing the audiences in first-person singular, she strongly resembles the manner of the ruling party leader, whom she criticizes. The key words of the pre-election Facebook messages for crisis management are: predictability and stability.

The centrist liberal **Movement for Rights and Freedoms political party**, perceived as a “Turkish party”, has been one of the consolidated Parliamentary entities since its foundation in 1990. Although the law does not permit parties on racial or religious basis, a number of ethnic Turkish and Roma candidates run in minority-populated areas. It won 10.51% and 30 seats, representing 336,306 voters. The election campaign is extremely modest on its leader’s - Mustafa Karadayi’s Facebook profile. The total number of publications is 21. He himself has only two personal appearances. In the first one he presents the slogan of the party *Restart of Statehood*. The second publication is against hatred, division, opposition, arrogance and aggression. In Karadayi’s Facebook profile prevail the addresses of international leaders, such as: Hans van Baalen (former Chair of ALDE); Dr. Hakima el Haite (Chair of the Liberal International); Graham Watson (former Chair of ALDE); Dacian Ciolos (Chair of the Renew Europe EP Group); Roman Jakic (Chair of the Liberal South East European Network); Dita Charanzova (Vice President of the EP), etc. The party is also flirting with the number of the ballot № 9. An advertising poster and an art photo of a cup of coffee, on the surface of which is written with dark chocolate "№ 9", collects the most likes of all publications in Karadayi’s campaign. In his last Facebook post, Karadayi shares that he voted at 9 hours and 9 minutes for: “restoration of normalcy in politics and of democracy in Bulgaria; as well as for accelerated economic development”.

The **Democratic Bulgaria Coalition** with two co-leaders – former law minister at the ruling party Government Hristo Ivanov and active protester against it in 2020 and Atanas Atanasov who has also been in service with it, comprises of 4 political formations, ranging from national conservatism, anti-corruption movement, green politics to liberalism. With the slogan “Bulgaria can do much more”, it ranks fifth with 9.45% and gained 27 seats, representing 302,280 voters. The co-chair Hristo Ivanov is very active on his Facebook page with 119 publications, an average of about 4 per day. More than half of them – 67, contain video - frequent live coverage, political ads, and TV appearances. Ivanov’s campaign relies on expert, not so much on emotional speech. The publications are mainly anti the ruling party. Many likes and reactions - 5.1 thousands, over 1000 /1.2K/ comments and 143 shares collects a post published on March 23 and related to the Russian influence and Russian spies in Bulgaria. A video with Ivanov’s summarizing the main theses of the Coalition in the weekly program "Panorama" on Public Bulgarian National TV – collects 4.4 thousands likes, 524 comments, and 97 shares. A video with the text "Let's get our country back, as we got

our beach back from Dogan together" has also gained popularity - 1.6 K likes, 53 comments, and 160 shares.

The most eclectic **coalition *Stand Up! Goons Out!*** unites 8 political formations of quite different profiles – social democratic, environmental, populist, liberal, agrarian, etc. receives 4,72% and gains 14 seats, representing 150,940 of the voters. The two leaders - Maya Manolova, a former member of the socialist party and a former national ombudsman and Nikolay Hadgigenov, lawyer and one of the 3 members of the “Poisonous Trio”- the coordinators of the 2020 protests, do not provide consolidated platform. The slogan of the coalition is "We have a plan for Bulgaria". The mandate holder is the *Movement 21* political party of Tatiana Doncheva, also a former member of the *Bulgarian Socialist Party*. The election strategy of *Stand up! Goons out!*, followed in the Facebook profile of the co-chair Maya Manolova, is extremely active, with a total of 155 posts, an average of 6 per day, reaching a maximum of 9 posts in the last day of the campaign. The predominant type are live videos (66), in which the leading figure is Manolova and only in 3 leading is the mandate holder Doncheva. In fact, the largest number of likes (20 thousands), collected in a separate post on the Manolova’s profile are for the participation of Doncheva in a bTV show. The other used tools are advertising posters, links to interviews, photos (40). Symbolism and irony are also present in the pre-election strategy. The big tent populism in Manolova’s campaign is strongly represented in her desire to demonstrate an understanding of public needs, sensitivity to weaknesses and shortcomings in the ruling party government, offering an action plan to save Bulgaria. Despite the tireless work to attract voters, the Coalition barely passed the 4% threshold.

The results of the conducted study show that during the pre-election campaign, the Bulgarians prefer to be informed first by television, and then - by online platforms, and especially - by Facebook. However, the number of posts, the frequency of the usage of Facebook, as well as the funds invested do not turn out to be directly proportional to the success achieved. Judging on the quality of the content of the posts, counting on populism in various dimensions, happen to be strategy that is more profitable. For some of the new political formations profitable turns to be also the aggressive rhetoric. Only few of the studied Facebook profiles of the political leaders that became MPs clearly present their intentions in such a way that voters could have the opportunity to make informed choices. Online communication has replaced politicians' live contact with the audiences and expanded its boundaries.

Although *Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria* is the first political force in the newly elected Parliament, the attitudes of the other elected political forces put it in isolation. Thus, it might be quite possible to add a political crisis to the health, economic, social and institutional ones. The results of the study are indicative to those interested in digital political communication during social isolation of pandemic.

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