

Fuzzy Choice – The Facebook Facade of the Triple Parliamentary Election Campaign’ 2021 in Bulgaria

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study undertaken by an academic team of the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication at the St. Kliment Ohridsky Sofia University of Bulgaria focuses on the pre-election online communication. The object is the dynamics of the online campaign for the three parliamentary elections in Bulgaria in 2021: one regular (April 4) and two early (July 11 and November 14). They have been held under the shadow of social distance and strict observance of the anti-epidemic measures against COVID-19 and in conditions of political confrontation, hostile public speech, and neglected professional standards. The subject is related to the messages in the Facebook profiles of the political leaders within the one-month period of the three campaigns. The methodology is an empirical study and comparative analysis. The scope of the study includes those political formations that have passed the 4% electoral threshold. The main research question of the study is how Facebook messages affect voters’ preferences.

Keywords: Pre-election campaign, Facebook messages, Populism, Informed choice

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 (Raycheva, 2014). The spread of the online platforms enhanced the burst of social movements, instigated by the growing inequality. Spontaneously organized (thanks to the social networks) the mass protests have managed to redefine the communication process. Manuel Castells called these movements “evolution of liberty and dignity” (Castells, 2015). Traditional mainstream media, especially radio and TV, were lagging dramatically behind in the high-speed race for consumers’ attention (Raycheva et al, 2017).

Thus, nourishing ground for rigorous development of populism as a political concept and rhetorical style has been created. In resting upon the four types of types of populism (*complete*, *excluding*, *anti-elitist*, and *empty populism*) outlined by Jagers & Walgrave (2007), it may be concluded that these types exist in Bulgaria, The conceptual schemes of Margaret Canovan (1981) and Cas Mudde (2007) have been also used as keys to understand and explain

the phenomenon, as well as to define populism in the country. Following the reasoning of Jacques Rupnik (2007, p. 130), it may be concluded that Bulgarian populism is a typical example of post-communist East European populism, and is highly imitative.

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. 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. The main objective is to analyze the dynamics of the online campaign for the three parliamentary elections in Bulgaria in 2021: one regular (April 4) and two early (July 11 and November 14). The subject is related to the messages in the Facebook profiles of the political leaders within the one-month period of the three campaigns. The methodology used is an empirical study and comparative analysis. The scope of the study includes those political formations that have passed the 4% electoral threshold. The main research question of the study is how Facebook messages affect voters' preferences.

BULGARIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS'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. 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 and the Diaspora also supported the national unrest. The protests were mostly rhisomatic, although they were coordinated by the so-called "Poisonous trio" (consisted of a journalist, sculptor and lawyer) and financially 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. However, the protesters, no matter that some of their demands were reasonable, could not formulate clear 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. Despite the political insecurity, the Government accomplished its term.

Under the protesters' pressure the Electoral Code has been amended to provide parallel use of voting machines in polling stations with a minimum of 300 registered voters. In the **regular Parliamentary election of April 4** with voter turnout of 50.61 % candidates from 71 political formations, organized

in 18 political parties and 12 coalitions run for the 240 seats in the National Parliament. The election apathy somehow displaced the initial political euphoria in society – a definitely protest vote of the Bulgarians against the political class (CEC, 2021). MPs from 2 political parties and 4 coalitions, representing 20 political entities, entered the 45th Parliament with the majority of seats (75) for the coalition *Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (CEDB)-Union of Democratic Forces (UDF)*.

The first actions of a number of the newly elected MPs were not encouraging in terms of expertise and political culture, demonstrating aggression and disregard for parliamentary rules. The only legislative result before the premature dissolving of the Parliament was the hastily revised Electoral Code, voted on the eve of Good Friday in violation of the Rules of Procedure, but with the intention to ensure greater fairness of the vote. A new Central Electoral Commission has been appointed, machine voting became compulsory for sections with more than 300 voters, and the restriction of up to 35 sections in non-EU countries has been removed. The caretaker government would hardly help for the solution of important issues for the country. Thus, it became quite possible to add a political crisis to the health, economic, social and institutional ones – a telling trend to the erosion of democracy. Although this was considered the most expensive election in the country's history, turnout of the **early vote on July 11** was unusually low - 40.38% or 9.23% lower than the vote in April (CEC, 2021). The activity of the early vote seemed to refute the effectiveness of the machine voting. Preventive actions of law enforcement agencies and police forces in places where there were suspicions of control voting, were not fair and effective enough. The candidates for the early vote in July did not differ significantly from the ones for the regular vote in April: 64 were the political formations organized in 15 political parties, 8 coalitions and 1 independent candidate. In the remake, the winners were again the same - 2 parties and 4 coalitions, representing 33 political entities, formed the 46th Parliament with the majority of seats (65) for the political party *There Is Such a People (TISP)*.

After the failure of the political formations to propose a government, new **early Parliamentary election on November 14** was scheduled. Nationwide the turnout fell to 40.23% - the lowest participation rate in 30 years (CEC, 2021). Among the main reasons for this were: lack of meaningful debate on the social, economic and civil priorities in the public agenda; frustration from the ongoing COVID epidemic; and challenges of the machine voting. The 47th Parliament consists of 33 political formations (3 political parties and 4 coalitions, representing 30 political forces). Although with no majority, the newly formed electoral alliance *We Continue the Change (WCC)* - unregistered political formation, led by the former caretaker ministers of Economy and Finance, appointed by President Radev, and US backed, won the most seats (67). Previously one of its leaders - Kiril Petkov has been appointed a minister in violation of the Constitution, which does not allow holding double citizenship. The electoral alliance *We Continue the Change (WCC)*, the coalition *BSP for Bulgaria*, the political party *There Is Such a People (TISP)*, and the coalition *Democratic Bulgaria (DB)* formed the incoming government of

Kiril Petkov. The other three political forces – the coalition *CEDB-UDF*, the political party *MRF* and the new nationalist political party *Revival* stayed in opposition.

THE FACEBOOK FACADE OF THE POLITICIANS

All participants, both in the regular and in the two early votes have bet extremely seriously on their presence online, especially on the social network Facebook, during the three one-month pre-election campaigns. In this text, the results are presented only for the political forces that crossed the 4% barrier. The focus of the discussion is on the comparison of the three election campaigns.

Overall, the campaigning of Boyko Borisov - the leader of the coalition *CEDB-UDF* and former Prime Minister’s via Facebook was rational and pragmatic. He was trying to play the role of a unifier of the nation. In the three campaigns, among the posts published on his Facebook page, were listed those of some European leaders who declared their support for him, such as the one by Manfred Weber, the chairman of the Group of the European People’s Party in the European Parliament.

The Facebook populist campaign of the leader of *There Is Such a People* Slavi Trifonov is perhaps best characterized in Katherine Calvait’s comment in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: “A model for success? More mockery. Trifonov, musician, presenter, TV star, neo-politician, no program. During the election campaign, he hardly showed up, his ideas were deliberately formulated in a vague way. Now that he can form a coalition with other reformist forces and will have to present a government program, he comes up with conditions that cannot be met, so the question arises: Is the man a visionary or a charlatan?” (Kahlweit, 2021). The party is named after one of his musical albums - *There Is Such a People*. His success actually continues a trend in both Europe and the United States: TV and show business stars are entering politics. The general conclusion is that Slavi Trifonov’s emotional campaign focuses on the position of “anti-status quo”, against fear, the importance of people’s opinions, and patriotism.

Teamwork was the leitmotif of the campaign of the newcomer *We Continue the Change*. The impression of the Facebook profile of Kiril Petkov – one of the two co-chairpersons, was that people are talking about him, not he about himself. This approach was different from that of most other politicians, who presented themselves in their profiles as the heart of their campaign. The other co-chairman of *We Continue the Change* Asen Vassilev did not run a campaign on his own Facebook profile.

The *Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)* suffered from contradictions within the party between its leader Korneliya Ninova and various fractions. The coalition *BSP for Bulgaria* gradually has departed from its clear-cut social democratic left profile, combining up to 19 political formations, ranging from communism and nationalism to environmentalism. Ninova’s Facebook profile in the three campaigns was moderate. The key words of her messages were predictability and stability.

The coalition *Democratic Bulgaria (DB)* has two chairpersons. In his official Facebook page one of them - Hristo Ivanov, relied on expert speech, not so much on emotional personal posts. The main message was the need for a change and the statement that the *DB* coalition knows how to make this change. The style and approach of the online campaign on Facebook of the other co-chairman of the *DB* coalition Atanas Atanasov also did not differ much from the campaign for all the parliamentary elections. He also relied on a rational rather than emotional approach. Most of his posts were linked to interviews and media publications.

The Facebook profile of the leader of the centrist liberal political party *Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF)* in all pre-election campaigns of 2021 was characterized by an unobtrusive and casual election strategy. 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. were published. There was no tension, but rather confidence in the upcoming race. It seemed that the *MRF* leader did not rely only on the social network election campaign, but rather on the hard electorate.

The 4 % threshold at the 14.11. early election was crossed also by another newcomer - the nationalist political party *Revival*, founded in 2014. Its leader Kostadin Kostadinov was extremely active on his Facebook page occupying the current far-right political space. Kostadinov's populist style was revealed in direct speech, attacks on political opponents, expressive language.

The most eclectic coalition *Stand Up! Goons Out! (SUWAC)* united several political formations of quite different profiles – social democratic, environmental, populist, liberal, agrarian, etc. 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 three members of the “Poisonous Trio” - the coordinators of the 2020 protests, were very active. Although the coalition was present in the 45th and 46th, it stayed under the 4% threshold for the 47th Parliament.

CONCLUSION

The comparative study of the three election campaigns (for the regular vote in April and for the early ones in July and in November) showed that all the politicians who took part in the elections have accounts and are relatively active in their Facebook campaigns. With regard to the research question related to the effectiveness of online campaigns the analysis shows that there is no direct correlation between the Facebook presence and the results of the elections. The findings of the study showed that funding invested in political advertising, scope of media activity, populism, hate speech, and online interactions were not sufficient for electoral prevalence. Deficits in purposeful political messages and in clear party programs were the more serious challenges to the developments of deliberative democracy.

Nevertheless, the growing impact of social networks on the process of communication between society and political leaders confirmed the assumption that this model of interaction will rigorously develop, especially in times of social isolation, such as the COVID-19 pandemic has caused.

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