Communicative and Persuasive Strategies in the Bulgarian Parliamentary Elections 2014

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ABSTRACT

The field of political communication has long cast its eye on the Internet and beyond its traditional US-American focus. Nevertheless, research into the Web’s full palette of expression means as well as across a wider, non-Western territory, remains modest. This paper analyzes how five major Bulgarian political parties presented themselves on the Web in one of the most heated and controversial elections since the fall of the totalitarian regime in 1989/1990. To shine a light on Bulgarian political communication, the paper takes the October 2014 parliamentary election campaign in Bulgaria, which took place amid unprecedented society-wide discontent and tension. It takes a close look at five major parties’ online platforms. It applies a multimodal content-analytical framework to a total of N=64 webpages. Distinct visual, textual, and multimodal persuasive strategies flesh out, and their relationships to each party’s background and poll performance are explored.

Keywords: Internet, Language and Symbolic Politics, New Technology, Propaganda & Persuasion, Qualitative – Discourse Analysis, Qualitative – Visual Analysis

INTRODUCTION

The political and media environments of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) vary from country to country. At the same time, the practices of politics and mass communications converge closely in terms of their development, ethical norms, and societal impact (e.g. Hallin & Mancini, 2004; 2012). Of the CEE countries which embarked on a journey towards democratization from 1989 on, Bulgaria has had one of the longest, most winding roads towards establishing a working market economy, rule of law, and a reliable system of representative government (e.g. Boykov, 2004; Grødeland, 2007; Koford, 2000; Valev, 2004), and many argue the trip is far from over (e.g. Zhelev, 2014). This painful transition has also affected the practice of political communication in Bulgaria and especially its online element, which is in its infancy compared to seasoned Western democracies.

The present paper seeks to understand how major Bulgarian political parties presented themselves on the Web in one of the most heated and controversial elections since the fall of the
totalitarian regime in 1989/1990. More specifically, it asks the following questions:

1. How do visuals and text interact in order to bring a coherent message to the campaign viewer in each of five major Bulgarian parties’ online campaigns?
2. Is there evidence for interaction between each party’s projected poll position and its campaign communication strategy?

To shine a light on Bulgarian political communication online, the paper focuses on the October 2014 parliamentary elections, which took place amid unprecedented society-wide discontent and tension (cf. Petrov, 2014). It takes a close look at five major parties’ online platforms and applies the ICON multimodal content-analytical framework developed by Seizov (2014).

This study is the first of its kind in the Bulgarian context, and it explores the country’s uptake of a globally recognized trend towards professionalized online campaigning which started as early as the 1990s in the United States (e.g. D’Alesio, 1997, 2000; Dorsey & Greene, 1997). It quickly spread to Europe (e.g. Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001; Schönbach, 1998) as well as to the rest of the democratic globe (e.g. Farrell, 1998; Plasser, 2000; Plasser & Plasser, 2002), meanwhile acquiring the name of professional / American campaign (Gibson & Römmele, 2001). The present study takes one of the main assets of the professional campaign – its message clarity and uniformity – and operationalizes it through the lens of harmonious multimodal orchestration (e.g. Bateman, 2008; Holsanova, 2012) as a mark of good communication design. It then checks for its presence and manifestations in the case of the Bulgarian parliamentary elections from October 2014 in order to characterize the state of affairs in the country’s political campaigning online.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The paper’s theoretical basis spreads across the disciplines of visual and online political communication as well as multimodal document analysis, and it focuses their specific strengths and prominent approaches on the study of image-text relationships (Bateman, 2014). The crafting of uniform, harmonious, persuasive campaign messages via the visual and verbal communication modes is seen as a mark of high professionalism and good communicative practice (e.g. Mellese & Müller, 2012; Seizov, 2014; Seizov & Müller, 2015). Discipline-specific literature reviews follow.

2.1. Visual Research in Political Communication

A long time after political communication was established as a field of interest, visual research therein remained on the sidelines. Throughout the 1980s, Doris Graber (1988) praised the ability of photographs to “make information transmission more realistic, accurate, and touching than is possible in purely verbal messages” (Moriarty & Popovich, 1991, p. 372).

A little later on, Griffin & Kagan (1996) pick up that argument and also turn our attention to images’ undeniable importance in political communication. This comes in sharp contrast to the prevailing Western practice of achieving proficiency in reading and producing verbal rather than visual communication artifacts (e.g. Kress, 2010). Therefore, despite the ubiquity of visuals, there is a tradition of scarcity of research done on their meaning-making potential and actual effects. Apart from Graber, Blackwood (1983) and Moriarty & Garramone (1986) are among the pioneers in visual political research, convinced of the centrality of images as both meaning communicators and attention grabbers. Adds Harding (2003): “in order to construct an image of some place, person or thing of which we have no direct experience, we rely heavily on visualization presented by others and made available to us” (p. 69). This is also one
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