Chapter 12

Facebook Photographic Images: Political Tools of Self–Presentation during the 2014 European Parliament Elections in Romania

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ABSTRACT

“Act, react, impact” was the slogan of the 2014 European Parliament elections. A social media campaign focused on a solid informing practice may constitute the first step in attaining European citizens’ actions and reactions. This chapter explores the visual Facebook presence of winning and losing Romanian candidates who stood for the 2014 EP elections. The visual framing analysis shows that the Romanian winning politicians preferred to visually promote themselves as statesmanlike candidates being surrounded by national influentials or by campaign entourage whereas the losing candidate framed themselves either as populist campaigners in the middle of larger audiences or as compassionate candidates interacting with individuals. The analysis of the visual categories highlights that both winning and losing EP candidates in Romania used a hybrid message. Despite the attempt to provide a visual presentation of European campaign paraphernalia, national identity features rendered through religious symbols and traditional elements prevailed.

INTRODUCTION

Although the main purpose of online campaigns is to involve, connect and mobilize citizens, the online engagement desired to be translated into an offline engagement is highly dependent on the informing practice. Besides the social media verbal content as a site of election campaign information, campaign photographs are also a means of citizens’ engagement (Lilleker et al., 2011, p. 209). Facebook photographic images are important during election campaigns for three main reasons: first, contemporary elections are based on a visual foundation (Grabe & Bucy, 2009, p. 85); second, photographic images have the meaning potential of authenticity, integration, evidence (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 19), by framing...
politicians as social actors performing certain actions; third, Facebook’s Timeline provides a visibility of the strategic visual planning of the campaign by allowing citizens “to see what images were posted in what order during a specific period of time” (Goodnow, 2013, p. 1586).

Suzanne Schols considers that a visual online European Parliament election campaign could potentially bring the EU closer to its citizens because candidates are given a face and complex policy issues are made easier to be grasped through infographics. Although photographs uploaded by politicians during EP election campaigns may trigger more likes, shares and comments than verbal posts, it is risky to state that an increasingly visual election campaign may help create a more positive, or at least a less negative image of the European Union. What Facebook photographic images may reveal is “the hybrid character of elections to the European Parliament” (Strömbäck, Maier, & Kaid, 2011, p. 5). The 2014 European Parliament elections took place in the context of a high skepticism regarding the European identity. The results of the Eurobarometer 77 (2012) showed that 49% of Europeans opted for an identity where their nationality comes before being European, 39% identified themselves with only their nationality, and 3% described themselves as European only. The candidates’ visual choice may emphasize the extent to which national and/or European issues are visually framed and it may show what visual categories a candidate uses in his/her self-presentation to promote a national and/or European identity.

This chapter has a threefold objective: (a) to investigate the strategic visual planning of the EP candidates in Romania; (b) to provide a comparative analysis of the master frames and themes used by the Romanian candidates in their visual self-presentation; (c) to determine the visual categories used by the Romanian candidates for the most dominant frames and themes.

BACKGROUND

Used as a means of expression and communication, visual images are “as power-laden as words are” (Jewitt, 2008, p. 252) and “the pictorial representation of reality is as subjective as verbal statements are” (Messaris, 2012, p. 102). According to Kathleen German (2010), the pictorial turn has a new dimension with the new media. The online self-presentations have exploded with the increasing use of new and social media and the new visual technologies have gradually been used in “constituting us, our interaction, our identities and our relationships” (Graham et al., 2011, p. 90). Facebook, “the platform to see and to be seen” (Caers et al., 2013, p. 984) has significantly contributed to “the increased publicness of personal images” (Van House, 2011, p. 128).

Throughout the years, political candidates have become aware of the significant role that visuals, especially photographic images, play in election campaigns. Conveying attributes associated with realism, credibility, believability, and truthfulness (Moriarty & Popovich, 1991), candidate images may mediate voter thoughts about political messages since “voters respond more to their perceptions than to objective realities about candidates” (Hacker, 1995, p.xi). “The photo opportunity” (Barnhurst & Quinn, 2012) has become an important election tool since citizens are likely to view rather than listen to candidates (Miller, 2013; Verser & Wicks, 2006). The publicly open “glasshouse” structure of Facebook (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 215) has allowed candidates to stage various photo opportunities which frame them as more prominent than their opponents.