THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS ON THE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION WITH THE ELECTORATE IN THE LAST ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF KOSOVO

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to present, through a comparative analysis, the influence of the development of information technology on the contemporary trends of political communication between politicians and the audience - the electorate through social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other forms in the recent campaign of the national and local elections in the Republic of Kosovo. Through an analysis of the public appearances and the political messages of Kosovo's political leaders on social networks, we have attempted to reflect the influence of this type of communication on certain audiences of the Kosovo electorate and how this kind of political communication influenced the transmission of political messages on certain focus groups of the voters in Kosovo as a new communication trend. We have also presented what in fact the political communication on the Kosovo political spectrum scene is and how the citizen or the electorate is activated in relation to this form of political communication. We have noticed that not only the political leaders, but also the candidates for mayors, the candidates for national and local assemblies have been quite active in sending political messages, publishing their party and electoral activities, and there has been an increase in the tendency of political marketing, often aiming the self-promotion of candidates as an individual, rather than the political party program or even the electoral offers for both levels of the elections. It has also been noticed that politicians and, in particular, the candidates for certain positions be it for national or local elections have more often used the space of social media networks with photos of their electoral activities than with written messages. It is interesting that to such political communication between politicians and the audience-the electorate in the last elections of both levels in the Republic of Kosovo the electoral bodies have almost equally responded to, by opening up debates, encouraging or supporting political parties or their programs or even criticizing, arguing or even harshly opposing to an inadmissible communication language a candidate, political party or even an independent candidate who in one way or another consideres them as a political opponent. We estimate that the use of social networks of all kinds by political entities and candidates of both levels of the last elections in the Republic of Kosovo was significantly greater compared to the earlier local and national elections. We estimate that the use of social networks as a form of political communication with the electoral corps has growth trends also in countries with consolidated democracies but there is a dynamic of growth in transition countries as in the case of the Republic of Kosovo.
Keywords: communication, message, choice, candidate

1. INTRODUCTION

Political communication as a notion in the contemporary trends of political message placement can be defined in different ways and in this respect we have differences in concept between scholars and different authors who have dealt with this issue. According to a study by a group of authors from the region published by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Skopje, "Political communication is as old as politics itself". At first, with this notion the learning of communication between the rulers and the ruled was understood. Later it indicated the exchange of discussions between the ruling and opposition politicians, mostly during the pre-election campaign".[237] However, we consider that the notion of political communication includes a much wider and multidimensional range of political communication actors such as political organizations, media and the audience or the citizen. However, slightly different definitions contain the definitions of Anglo-Saxon literature. Researchers Denton and Woodward define political communication as: "Pure discussion about the distribution of public resources (revenues), the official authority (given the power/right to make legitimate, legislative and executive decisions) and official sanctions (what the state rewards or punishes)".[238] The same authors further characterize political communication "in the form of the goals of its followers to influence the political environment".[239]

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[237] http://www.fes.org.mk/pdf/politicki_alb.pdf (page visited on 10. 10.2017).
[238] Brian McNair, "Introduction to Political Communication", Tirana, 2009, p.18.
[239] Brian McNair, "Introduction to Political Communication", Tirana, 2009, p.18.

2. FORMS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN THE LAST NATIONAL AND LOCAL ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF KOSOVO

The organization of elections, whether local or central, involves a large number of activities, engagements of political organizations, institutions that organize and monitor elections, non-governmental organizations and in particular of the media which play the main role in broadcasting messages from politicians to the audience-the citizen or the voter. In the trends of a rapid development of the media industry and especially information technology, recently, political communication in the politician-media-voter triangle has become very attractive, dynamic, with greater access of those that send political messages to the audiences or voters. The era of digitalization has enabled and in some way has made it also easier for politicians and citizens to send and receive political messages by concluding the link of political communication. In this focus, social networks (social media) are very trendy in the recent years, through which there is a very dynamic and interactive communication between political parties, their candidates for both levels and the audience or voters. Kosovo as a new state is almost in the same trend as the countries of the region and beyond, where not only the candidates competing in elections but also the senior leaders of state institutions send political messages, stances, comments and proposals through social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Linkedin, Snapchat, etc. These social networks are already a common part as media being widely used by all political actors in the Republic of Kosovo, as evidenced by the recent national and local elections held on June 11th, respectively October 22nd of this year. During the electoral campaigns for both election levels, social networks have been flooded with the transmission of messages, ideas, information on issues of political nature, the disclosure of political offers and program principles of the organizations they represented. This form of political communication of the actors that make up this kind of communication is not always successful and well-suited and does not always find its way to certain focus groups or interest groups to whom the political message is addressed. In this way, the communication of politicians becomes more and more complex, claiming the right audience, while the message competition, which is aimed at the concentration of citizens, is ever greater and also the rules that follow the effective political communication. However, it should be acknowledged that social networks as a medium of political communication have become a very relevant factor in the case of the last elections in Kosovo, inevitable in mediation of the politician-citizen communication, but not the omnipotent mediator, as it is another matter how it affects the growth of confidence or the influence of voting on a certain political concept. The candidates of the two election levels in Kosovo have been very active in social networks, mostly through Facebook, reflecting their electoral activities, then applying the publication of these events through live stream as well. But not always political leaders or even political party candidates can timely manage the dynamics of "the production of events" on social networks, they often engage administrators of their websites or blogs on social networks that have often made mistakes, have deviated from the context of events or debates or have even touched the moral code of political communication. Professor Mark Marku declares that: "The application of new media and technologies is a controversial issue among experts on how much electronic democracy is a real democracy, or how interactivity turns into a real conversation and how this remains as a virtual perception".[240]

3. POLITICAL COMMUNICATION ON SOCIAL NETWORKS IN THE LAST LOCAL AND NATIONAL ELECTIONS

Political parties, coalitions and independent candidates in the last national and local elections in the Republic of Kosovo have been quite active in electoral campaigning or political marketing either for the political groupings they represented either in the personal plane. From an analysis of these political and electoral activities, there is a tendency of individual promotion, more promotions of the number of the party and candidate running in the elections rather than the electoral offer or governing programs, and these party slogans have also been accompanied by photo galleries without concrete messages of what we call political communication. We shall illustrate some of the most frequently encountered examples in these two pair of elections in Kosovo.

The social networks Twitter, Facebook and Instagram have been used as a marketing tool by the political entities that competed in the national elections of June 11 and the local elections of October 22, 2017 in Kosovo. In most

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[240] https://al.ejo-online.eu/mediat-e-reja/fushata-elektorale-nen-ndikimin-e-teknologjive-dhe-mediave-te-reja (page visited on 15.10.2017).

cases on Facebook and Twitter, the "hashtag" is used, which is the hash symbol (#), to create a link. The political parties, the candidates, but also the election headquarters of the political entities during these campaigns, used this as a marketing form, targeting new generations that spend longer time on social networks. A good part of the candidates (but to a lesser extent) have also used Instagram and Snapchat by placing electoral slogans on the youth focus group which in Kosovo largely uses these two types of social networks.

We are presenting some electoral slogans of the main political parties participating in these two pair of elections. #The Force of Change for Kosovo#, #Together Determined#, #The New Direction#, #With Heart#, #The League#, etc. are only some of the mottos and slogans of the political parties that have been frequent on social networks recently and which were associated with the number of the party with which political groups competed and the number of the candidates competing within the political entity and who advertised their personal number alongside that of the party since the two levels of elections in the Republic of Kosovo are organized according to the electoral system with open lists. "Political party leaders and candidates for deputies, according to analysts in Prishtina, used their social networks to ask for votes and very little to make a presentation of the program of the political subject or candidates".[241] We estimate that even in Kosovo social networks are media that are increasingly being used for communication, especially in young age groups who even better and more effectively master digital devices especially smartphones that have become a "trendy tool" for political communication on social networks. Today, these information technology equipments are also largely used by political and institutional leaders who almost daily communicate with the public, the citizen, interest groups who are potential voters. "In this respect, social networks are the new frontiers of political communication. A message, a picture or a video put on Twitter, Facebook or Instagram, brings the leader closer to his follower, making it real and accessible to voters who can interact with it autonomously and immediately. However, it is clear that nothing can be improvised if being open to comments meaning to also accept the risk of criticisms or public attacks".[242]

Considering everything mentioned above, we can freely say that political communication, the organization of electoral campaigns and political marketing of political organizations in the Republic of Kosovo is in "digital era" like in the countries of the region and Europe. It is true that technologies offer the possibility of extensive and continuous communication. Personalization of the audience-based message enables political actors to monitor the electorate and understand the needs and inclinations and undertake the necessary organizational, logistical and public relations actions.

We are illustrating with concrete statistics the presentation of the candidates for the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kosovo in the last national elections held on June 11, 2017 on the social network Facebook. "The Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës) together with its coalition partners New Kosova Alliance (Aleanca Kosova e Re) and the Alternative (Alternativa) are leading for Facebook campaign posts, the Democratic Party of Kosovo (Partia Demokratike e Kosovës) with its partners the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (Aleanca për Ardhmërinë e Kosovës) and the Kosovo Initiative (Nisma për Kosovën) follow on the second place whereas the third is the Self-Determination Movement (Lëvizja Vetëvendosje). These results have been communicated by the network of civil society organizations "Democracy in Action". According to DiA, the coalition LDK-AKR-Alternativa, since the beginning of the campaign has made 128 posts and leads in contrast to other subjects, followed by the PDK-AAK-Nisma coalition with 77 posts while Vetevendosje reaches 38 posts. Meanwhile, for posts on Facebook Avdullah Hoti leads with 71 posts, Ramush Haradinaj with 34 posts and Albin Kurti with 30 posts".[243]

4. CONCLUSIONS

1. The era of digitization has enabled and in a way made it easier for politicians and citizens to send and receive political messages by closing the link of political communication. Kosovo as a new state is almost in the same trend as the countries of the region and beyond, where not only the candidates competing in elections but also the senior leaders of state institutions send political messages, stances, comments and proposals through social networks.

2. The possibility of exploitation for the vast majority of political communication actors "of the tools" of the digital era in Kosovo, which are available today for targeting potential audiences or voters through social networks, especially through Facebook, which is estimated to be around 1 million users in Kosovo, make the method easier to

[241] https://www.evropaelire.org/a/25412987.html (page visited on 21.10.2017).
[242] http://zeri.info/zerat/118194/365-dite-fushate-elektorale/ (page visited on 01.11.2017).
[243] http://kallxo.com/rrjetet-sociale-afrimi-njeanshem-politikaneve-votuesit/ (page visited on 03.11.2017).

reach the right audience on the right time and in the right equipment with the right content, thus significantly facilitating direct political communication.

3. Placing political messages at certain audiences - the electorate through social networks has significantly cheaper cost than on other media and are realized more quickly, which for new and transition countries like Kosovo is very significant.

4. The trends of globalization, the dynamic development of information technology and "the era of social networks" have almost completely overwhelmed the political spectrum, the electoral body and other political communication actors in the Republic of Kosovo.

LITERATURE

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