Storytelling in Online Political Communication during the Presidential Elections Campaign in Romania

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Abstract: *The second voting round of the Romanian presidential elections, that took place during 2-16 November 2014, was strongly influenced by the debate surrounding the diaspora vote. The political class was divided between politicians who tried to ignore this issue and those who considered that the government limits the exercise of a fundamental right. This paper examines if politicians used strategic narratives and storytelling techniques during the second round of the campaign. The primary objective is to investigate the discourse of the main five candidates who received the highest number of votes after the first tour of the elections. A derived objective is to determine if these narratives stimulated the quality of political debate and the interaction between citizens and politicians. Using pragmatic discourse analysis, the present study investigates the main subjects discussed during the second voting round. The investigation also focuses on the controversy surrounding diaspora vote. Results show that politicians cultivate strategic narratives and storytelling techniques in order to support their campaign objectives and to enact their own definition of the situation.*

Keywords: *Romania, strategic narratives, political communication, Facebook, storytelling.*

Introduction

The professionalization of political communication (Negrine & Lilleker 2002; Negrine *et al.* 2007; Negrine 2008) has created the context for the debate regarding the use of strategic narratives and storytelling in campaign communication. These practices have the potential to become efficient tools for candidate legitimation, image consolidation, raising the supporter base and mobilizing voters. In this context, a question that arises is to what extent electoral campaigns are conceived to stimulate voter participation and to offer relevant information for an educated voting decision? Or, on the contrary, are they only a vehicle for building positive image capital for politicians? While this objective cannot be excluded or condemned, the aim of this paper is to investigate if politicians encourage debates about the most important issues on the public agenda. In order to answer these questions, the paper analyses politicians' online discourse during the 2014 Romanian presidential elections.

The first objective of this paper is to investigate whether political actors use strategic narratives and storytelling practices as means to create their own definition of reality on their owned media (SNS). A second objective is to determine if these narratives help stimulate the quality of the political debate and the interaction between citizens and political actors. In other words, do citizens have the opportunity to contribute to the negotiation of the campaign agenda, introducing their own topics?

The paper begins with a theoretical discussion surrounding the use of strategic narratives and storytelling in politics to explore the way politicians position themselves towards their opponents and voters. The analysis will also focus on specific ways in which SNS are used to create a relation with voters. Contextual information about Romanian politics will be offered. The paper continues with a study that investigates the main narratives created during the electoral campaign. In pursuance of the research objectives presented, pragmatic discourse analysis is employed. This way, the general communicational trends used on social media will be identified. The analysis focuses on a specific event that stirred ample debate both on news media and online (the Romanian diaspora vote problem) and determines to what extent SNS are used to stimulate further user-to-user or users-to-candidate debates on Facebook.

According to previous studies (Holotescu *et al.* 2010; Aparaschivei 2011; Grigoraşi, Toader 2013; Toader 2014), online political campaigns in Romania develop new practices which foster civic participation even if these trends are not in a mature stage. Facebook is an important resource used to initiate strategic narratives or to continue the ones promoted in mainstream media. Conversely, some politicians avoid discussing sensible issues because of the potential negative impact on their image. The present study remains in the same area of investigation,

and can contribute with empirical results that can confirm or infirm the hypothesis regarding the democratization of online political communication.

Strategic narratives: a story about „us" and the „others"

Strategic narratives (e.g. Roselle, Miskimmon & O'Loughlin 2014) help create consensus around shared understanding of social and political phenomena. For example, during the 2014 Romanian presidential elections, residents living in Romania became solidary with citizens working abroad who didn't have proper conditions to vote. This was a reason of displeasure, and a sense of consensus emerged around this issue. Therefore, the job of Prime Minister Victor Ponta (who was also a presidential candidate) to explain the situation was difficult because it came in conflict with the opinion of the majority.

These types of narratives are meant to build attraction and can surpass persuasion through rational argument (Roselle, Miskimmon & O'Loughlin 2014, p. 73). This doesn't exclude the possibility to generate attraction through rationalistic reasoning. Yet, influence can also be exerted through affect or feelings. An individual is more likely to accept an argument that inspires confidence, for example.

The power of strategic narratives comes from the fact that they are inherent to human beings, facilitating the understanding of the social life or political power because they meet individual pre-existing ideas or narratives (Roselle, Miskimmon & O'Loughlin 2014, p. 75). Therefore, there is a process of negotiation of meaning given to specific issues or situations in concordance with each individual's social capital (Bourdieu 1994). Strategic narratives also tap into the problem of group identity by uniting large communities and describing who "we" are and "our" position in relation to "others" (Bially Mattern 2005, p. 610).

There are several elements that conceive the structure of a strategic narrative (Roselle, Miskimmon & O'Loughlin 2014; Moon 2006): characters or actors (who are usually described as important to the narrative); the setting (which locates the events and creates context); conflict or action (the problem and its evolution – which shows the importance of temporality); and the resolution or suggested resolution. There is also the case of "concise narratives" (Shenhav 2005), in which the speaker mentions several temporal deictics. Various time-periods are referred to simultaneously in a short discourse of two or three paragraphs. This phenomenon is described as well with the term *multitemporality.* The goal of such narratives is to create an identity for the speaker and to reinforce an ideology that brings individuals together through shared values, feelings or information. Sometimes stories are correlated to a specific context, which is generalized, or there are cases when actors make assumptions about the future based on facts from the past or present. Also, for the ease of understanding, language is simplified and popular culture references are used. As a result, strategic narratives are

a power resource, as the person using them may try to influence others or justify a specific policy.

Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin (2014, p. 77) identify three types of strategic narratives: *international system narratives*, which define how the world is organised and the actors; *national narratives* that describe the values and goals of a nation; and *issue narratives* that establish the need and the outcome of a specific policy. This paper will focus on the latter two narratives, which are commonly used by politicians when discussing national politics.

Storytelling: our memory is story based

The debate about strategic narratives is also linked to storytelling. This practice is used in reconciliation (Moon 2006; Little 2011), having a cathartic effect, or in planning because they help people make sense of the past and prepare for the future (van Hulst 2012). According to Kent (2015) stories help individuals make sense of every aspect of their cultural life including politics, ideology or the identification with a specific party. Moreover, as Schank (1999) notes, "human memory is story based" (p. 12), as humans remember facts or events in an episodic manner. Stories help individuals experience archetypal myths (Woodside 2010, p. 533).

These perspectives can be analyzed in accordance with the feeling of attraction fostered by strategic narratives. Therefore, the power of stories is determined by the fact that they satisfy the individuals' need of belonging. In this context, storytelling has both a creative process and a rhetoric part, being used to inform, persuade, and socialize individuals (Kent 2015, p. 2). According to Salmon (2010, p. 118) the impact of narratives comes from the fact that they were used in every socialization stage from childhood to adulthood. Moreover, for a long time scholars of persuasion recognized two ways of processing a message: *centrally*, where the message is critically analyzed, and *peripherally* – the content is evaluated based on the personality of the speaker or the mood of the listener (Poletta 2008, p. 27). With the rise of storytelling practices, a third form of message processing has been identified. When hearing a story people tend to *immerse* themselves in the plotline, which can lead to lasting changes of opinions (Poletta 2008).

As Riessman (2008) points out, not everything is a story. A good narrative has convincing characters, an attractive plotline and is tailored to fit an audience (Kent, 2015: 5). Telling stories does not only mean making an inventory of events (Van Hulst 2012: 300). The stake of a story is found in the way elements are connected to form a coherent whole that can mobilize certain emotions from the collective imaginary (Salmon, 2010). As a result, the story becomes memorable and can foster cohesion and consensus – two important goals of the political discourse. Narratives may also be useful for legitimation and the creation of a common enemy. Still, as Berut (2010) argues, the power of storytelling is limited by the fact that the

members of the public also have a role in the negotiation of meaning, by interpreting a story on their own. The awakening of emotions is the result of the process of interpretation, and not the result of the intention of the speaker.

Strategic narratives and storytelling in a mediated context

It is not always easy for politicians to spread their own narratives in a communicational arena defined by competition and a process of negotiation of meaning. Politicians, news media representatives and citizens (through opinion polls) are the key actors in this process of negotiation. The rise of social media has offered politicians further opportunities to communicate their strategic narratives or stories without third party interference. They have an owned media space, where the political message can be disseminated. However, they don't have total control over the information spread. Once published online, the message can be shared, recontextualized by others and can suffer further interpretation and alteration (Gurevitch, Coleman & Blumler 2009). Still, the politicians have a platform where they can provide clarifications and can better explain their stance on specific issues.

In terms of the specificities of online political communication, Nick Couldry (2008, p. 382) notes some pressures that online narratives are faced with. As opposed to oral storytelling or the televised discourse, online there is a pressure to mix text with other communicational resources (sound, video, still image), as the focus is more on the visual presentation of a story. In the same time, the length of the narrative is limited, so the public can access it rapidly. The message often becomes standardized to be easier understood.

According to some scholars (e.g. Bimber & Davis 2003), new media create the opportunity for politicians to communicate directly with voters and to provide useful information for an informed voting decisions. Yet, recent studies (e.g. Grigoraşi & Toader 2013; Toader 2014) show that Facebook is not always used by politicians to inform voters about policies, but to consolidate the image of political actors and to broadcast their campaign events. The issues discussed on these platforms are strategically chosen to fit these objectives, and controversial topics are avoided. As a result, this paper studies if candidates in the Romanian presidential elections from 2014 addressed the problem regarding the diaspora vote, and used strategic narratives to discuss this topic. It is important to see if politicians address this theme, as it was largely debated in traditional media.

The context: presidential elections 2014 – diaspora vote become a pivotal topic

In Romania the president is elected in a two rounds voting process. At the end of the first round of the campaign, which lasts for one month, the two candidates with the largest number of votes compete for the presidential chair. The second

tour of elections lasts two weeks and is critical for establishing the winner. This is also one of the most engaging parts of the campaign, as turnarounds can happen. The first round of the 2014 Romanian presidential campaign started October 3rd, with 14 candidates, and concluded November 2nd with two winners: Victor Ponta, the candidate of the left wing alliance and Prime Minister at the time, and Klaus Iohannis, the candidate of the right wing alliance, and mayor of the city of Sibiu (elected in 2007 as European Capital of Culture). The victory was clear cut as Victor Ponta obtained 40.44% of the votes and Klaus Iohannis, 30.37%. The first candidate had one million votes ahead his opponent, and all polls and odds pointed towards his victory in the second round of the presidential elections. However, the predictions were contradicted as on November 16th Klaus Iohannis was elected president with 54.43% of the votes, defeating Victor Ponta with a difference of almost 9%. In other words, the right wing candidate managed in two weeks to recover the difference of 1 million votes between him and Victor Ponta and to gain more supporters.

The debates and studies (e.g. IRES, Post electoral study. Motivations and factors that influence the electorate) that followed the presidential campaign attributed this turnout to the problems regarding the diaspora vote and to mobilization via social media. The context was the following: at the end of the first elections round, a scandal erupted about the small number of voting stations in countries where large numbers of Romanian immigrants work and live. According to official data, Romania has over 3 million citizens working abroad, still the government, organized only 294 polling stations in 95 states. This number was insufficient, and as a result several citizens didn't get to express their right to vote, being locked outside the voting stations at the closing of the ballots. Spontaneous protests were organized in such places as citizens expressed their discontent towards the way the Romanian authorities organized the elections. They posted pictures and videos online showing the long ques as a proof of the government's mismanagement. These materials were soon after broadcasted by the national and international media.

Politicians as Klaus Iohannis declared their solidarity with the protesters and asked for the prolongation of the voting process in the diaspora. The scandal had also international echoes as the chairman of the Commission for European Affairs in the Bundestag, Gunther Krichbaum, stated that Romanian authorities willfully hindered the vote in favor of the right wing candidates. The scandal concluded with the resignation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Prime Minister Victor Ponta pledged that the difficulties will not repeat on the second round of the elections.

In spite of these statements and the measures taken, the problems with the diaspora vote recurred in the second tour. Moreover, the lack of empathy of the authorities with the situation of the diaspora voters conducted to more violent protests than in the first round. After the closing of the ballots, citizens who didn't get to express their right to vote forced their entrance into the voting stations es-

tablished in consulates and embassies. In Paris and Turin there were also street fights between Romanian citizens and the police forces. In order to calm down protesters, tear gas and force were used. In sign of solidarity, other protests took place in Romania. Also, during elections day, images showing the long ques and the following protests were aired on television and shared on SNS. This lead to voter mobilization as 15.6% of the Romanian electorate came to the ballots. Most of these voters belonged to the undecided category, or they were non-voters.

Methodology

This paper is based on two theoretical assumptions:
- the use of the internet in political communication can help democratize this filed by offering more space for the discussion of issues of public concern (Bimber & Davis 2003);
- political campaigns are "moments of symbolic overheating" (Gerstlé 2002, p. 76). They are "privileged sequences of reality construction to which several actors participate according to their interests and resources" (Gerstlé 2002, p. 75). Candidates are involved in a "battle of representations" trying to enforce their own definition over reality. In this battle politicians use owned media (websites, blogs, social media accounts, newsletters etc.) and news media.

Based on these assumptions, this study answers to the following research questions:

(RQ1) Do politicians use strategic narratives in their campaign communication? Who are the characters created? What is the storyline?
(RQ2) Do politicians use SNS like Facebook to inform the citizens about their political offer or is it only a medium used for building a positive public image?
(RQ3) To what extent do politicians use Facebook to foster interaction with voters?

In order to answer these research questions, the present study offers a qualitative approach, based on pragmatic discourse analysis. The time-frame of this study is 2-16 November 2014, representing the campaign for the second tour of the Romanian presidential elections. The corpus comprises the Facebook pages of five Romanian politicians, who received the most votes after the first elections tour: Victor Ponta (left wing candidate and Prime Minister of Romania), Klaus Iohannis (right wing candidate for the National Liberal Party), Călin Popescu Tăriceanu (Liberal Reformist Party, a centre-right liberal political party), Elena Udrea (Popular Movement Party, a centre-right political party), and Monica Macovei (independent candidate, with a right wing policy approach). The investigation is focused on how the candidates reacted to the Romanian diaspora vote problem.

Data presentation: a story about 'Us' and 'Them'

The following data focus mainly on the campaign communication of candidates Victor Ponta and Klaus Iohannis with emphasis on the diaspora vote. References to the Facebook communication of politicians such as Monica Macovei, Elena Udrea and Călin Popescu Tăriceanu, will be made only in correlation to the later topic. The purpose is to reveal specific discursive strategies and to investigate if politicians involved voters in their campaign communication.

The textual analysis of the messages published by politicians on Facebook focused on two types of strategic narratives: national and issue narratives (Roselle, Miskimmon & O'Loughlin 2014, p. 77). The results show that the national narratives answer to the questions: who are Romanians, who are their common enemies and how do they fight them? An issue narrative is built in relation to the diaspora vote and generates specific discursive strategies in line with the overall objectives of the politicians. In the same time, the way politicians construct their discourse shows elements of storytelling, such as the creation of characters, suspense/tension, finding resolutions, the mobilization of emotions.

In terms of national narratives, the two candidates in the second tour of the elections introduced narratives meant to construct a definition of the Romanian political realm based on the identification of a common enemy. In this context, Iohannis created an opposition axis between the Romanian citizens, who needed new standards of living and the consolidation of democracy, and the Social Democrat Party and his corrupt representatives, led by Victor Ponta. On this axis, he constructs an image of an independent leader, who isn't controlled by politicians with obscure interests. In order to fight this common enemy, all Romanians are invested with responsibility, the power to act and the knowledge to discern between the most adequate political offers. The tension between the two antagonistic actors can be solved through civic implication. A particular result of the analysis shows that the citizens are defined as heroes who in the end contributed to the relief of the tension.

> *If we look around, we see in Romania too much corruption, too many lies and too much thievery. We see Romania where slowly but sure the fear is reestablished. We see that democracy is in danger in Romania. We see a country where a candidate who is also Prime Minister makes promises after promises (…) This is Victor Ponta's Romania!* (Klaus Iohannis, November 8th, 2014)

> *I am a free man, not the exponent of barons (a way of referring to the corrupt and influential politicians from Romania a.n.). I propose to you a Romania based on respect and prosperity. I propose respect for the law and for the right of every citizen to vote. (...) Dear Romanians, I tell you: do not give all the power to a single inauthentic, unreformed left wing party!* (Klaus Iohannis, November 12th, 2014)

Dear Romanians, today you have been heroes. (...) Now, after 25 years since the Romanian Revolution, people have got out in the streets to fight for their right to vote. Today's stake has been the right to vote. It is incredible. (Klaus Iohannis, November 16th, 2014)

In the case of Victor Ponta, the campaign on Facebook focused on three campaign directions: a) celebrity endorsement – he published images of Romanian public figures (sportsmen, actors, doctors etc.) and international leaders to facilitate a transfer of legitimacy; b) a strategic discourse, which associated Klaus Iohannis with the former president Traian Băsescu, meant to discredit Iohannis; c) the highlight of his political achievements; d) the promotion of a discourse that militated for the unification of Romanians. The national narrative was built around the identification of president Traian Băsescu as the common enemy. Based on this dichotomy he positioned himself as a leader who fights for unity. He also projects the image of a saving hero, who will end the old conflictual political regime. In this attempt, he will be supported by the Romanian voters.

We promised to end Băsescu regime. We will keep our word and this regime will end with the Romanians' vote on Sunday. (Victor Ponta, November 14th, 2014)

I address to all bona fide Romanians to get out to vote on November 16th. I assure them that what happened in 2012, when their vote was ignored by the Băsescu regime, will not happen again! (Victor Ponta, November 14th, 2014)

Regarding the issue narrative generated around the diaspora topic, Iohannis used this issue as his main campaign theme and had different approaches:

a. he used the problems with the diaspora vote as a basis for the "go out to vote" messages ("I ask those queuing at the voting stations in diaspora to call home and say what is happening to them! I also ask Romanians to vote for those who can't do it because of the disastrous organization!");

b. appreciation and thankful messages ("Despite the poor organization, of the voting process, people organized and came in large numbers at the ballots both in the country and in diaspora. I thank to all Romanians who expressed this fundamental right of democracy");

c. messages expressing compassion and solidarity ("Our thoughts are with you, those who endured disdain and rain, cold and injustice. This evening is yours! Romania deserves your vote");

d. he gives a voice to ordinary citizens by distributing their messages on his page ("This is the result of Victor Ponta's promises! Dear Romanians, we ask you to get out and vote in Romania! We are constrained not to vote! We don't know what we can do! Dear parents, grandparents, friends we ask you: get out and vote! – the message of Daniel, a young Romanian from diaspora"; "Dear Romanians from all over the world, use the hashtag

#diasporavoteaza so that your photographs can be centralized. Show everybody that, for you, the vote is not a catchphrase, but a right that no one can take away from you".);

    e. he provides information about the voting process in diaspora;

    f. uses interpellation ("Mr. Ponta, ask the ministry of Foreign Affairs to solve these problems!"; "I ask the government to urgently find a solution to set up new polling stations so that Romanians from diaspora are given a practical solution to vote").

A similar strategy was employed by Monica Macovei, who shares messages from protesters or images and short videos with the queues of voters in London. This politician also uses the diaspora issue as a basis for mobilizing messages ("In diaspora me and other thousands of people are standing in line for hours to vote. They are totally disrespecting us, they are humiliating us! What are you doing at home? Get out to vote!"), value judgments towards the government ("Ponta is totally disrespecting thousands of Romanians who cannot vote".) and interpellations/obligations ("The Government must convene and release an Emergency Ordinance to extend the electoral process").

Through these strategies both candidates create a position of power in relation to their common opponent. In relation to their adversary, they rely on the representational force associated with strategic narratives. They scrutinize the government's actions and use an aggressive speech meant to point out its inability to control the events. Through their discourse the political actors are assigning themselves with the knowledge and the legitimacy to evaluate the actions of Victor Ponta and his cabinet and to make him accountable for his actions in relation to the diaspora vote. In the same time, they create a connection with voters, by assuming the role of official representatives of their cause, by giving voice to ordinary citizens. They integrate the voice of the street in their own communication agenda. In the same time, they generate an "us *versus* them" discourse, opposing to types of actors – Romanians who want change, and the establishment who hinders the expression of their fundamental rights, to prevent the change of the status quo.

On the opposite communicational spectrum, Victor Ponta addressed the diaspora topic only in two messages: a general one ("All those who vote are equal and they are good citizens of Romania, even if they live in this country or abroad. No one is above others. Discrimination and hatred between Romanians have been promoted for 10 years and must be stopped."); and technical one, in which he reassured citizens of the fact that the institutions are in control of the situation ("In diaspora, through the measures taken by BEC – the Central Electoral Bureau a.n. – and MAE – the Ministry of Foreign Affairs a.n. – all those who want to vote on Sunday will be able to do it").

Through these messages Ponta cultivated a statutory discourse. He also tried to activate an "us *versus* them" discourse, by subordinating the diaspora theme in his larger campaign theme about the unification of all Romanians and the elimination of internal animosities. This approach referred indirectly to Traian Băsescu's conflictual discourse, which often sparked tensions between different social categories. In the same time, by reassuring citizens that the government controls the diaspora situation, he tried to communicate from a position of power given by the fact that he had all the administrative and political means to provide solutions. However, considering the context of the 2014 presidential elections, and the lack of space attributed by the candidate to this topic, his tactics came in conflict with his campaign slogan: "The president who unites". The definition of reality proposed by Victor Ponta and the way he discussed the diaspora topic gave his political opponents the opportunity to attack him, by redefining the situation: Ponta failed to create the proper conditions for Romanians to express their fundamental right to vote.

These results show that the diaspora topic, which was largely discussed in mass-media and could be classified as a common interest topic, was treated by politicians as a strategic subject. Iohannis had an advantageous ground in this discussion, therefore he used emotional and complex messages focusing both on solidarity with the diaspora and the search for solutions to their problem, while Ponta had a superficial approach. The emotional capital associated with this topic was accessed by each politician according to his strategic interests.

Reviving old themes and awakening emotions

Data collected show that the candidates used Facebook to answer to their opponents' attacks, to revitalize older campaign themes, to initiate political partnerships, or to respond to issues discussed in news media. For example, there was a change of messages between Ponta and Iohannis regarding the prime-minister's electoral promises. In this context, Iohannis and Ponta declared:

> *Given that the Prime Minister makes new promises daily, my conviction is strengthened that in 2015 we will have increases in taxes or cuts in salaries, like the European Commission warns us.* (Klaus Iohannis, November 4th, 2014)
>
> *We will not raise taxes! We will not change the flat tax! Klaus Iohannis lies to get votes! Romanians need to know that in the following years taxes will continue to drop!* (Victor Ponta, November 13th, 2014)

A similar message exchange was seen in relation to the organization of an electoral debate.

> *The various electoral confrontations which Mr. Iohannis sends to us through intermediaries represent a blame vote for the Romanian press. Mr. Iohannis doesn't*

desire to go in a television studio and doesn't want to be moderated by journalists. (…) Therefore I ask him to participate, starting Monday, November 10th, at the four electoral meetings to which we were invited by televisions. I want him to know that I will be there starting 20:00, no matter if he has or has not the courage to show up". (Victor Ponta, November 5th, 2014)

Until today, Victor Ponta ignored me successfully. There was no public debate, no sign that he would like a discussion on this topic. In conclusion, I live my pride aside and I'll see you at 20:00 on Realitatea TV in a televised debate! (Klaus Iohannis, November 9th, 2014)

In what concerns the revival of older campaign themes, largely invoked since 2012 until the 2014 elections, Ponta tries to legitimate his candidacy with the help of the 2012 referendum, organized after the dismissal of former president Traian Băsescu by the Parliament. After the referendum, 7.4 million Romanians, representing the majority of those who voted, chose to suspend the president. However, the plebiscite was invalidated by the Constitutional Court due to lack of quorum. The vote against Băsescu was used by Ponta as a campaign theme in 2012 for the parliamentary elections, and reused in 2014. The left wing candidate tried to legitimise his candidacy on the popular support received in 2012.

Traian Băsescu has a plan in which Klaus Iohannis and all his men play a role. Their coordinated action refers to the contestation of next week's vote. Băsescu could say that he will remain president until all the contestations are judged. But this time the situation form 2012 will not repeat. 7.4 million reasons for a stronger Romania! (November, 9th, 2014)

Not least, Monica Macovei launched on her Facebook page a partnership proposal for Klaus Iohannis, to which he responded affirmatively on his own page. The message exchange was later disseminated in news media.

Mr. Iohannis,
In the name of the people who voted for me, and for those who worked pro-bono in this campaign, I send you the essential requirements to save democracy and the rule of law in Romania. If you accept these minimum requirements, please sign this agreement, with the commitment that you will totally comply to it both from the position of president of PNL, co-president ACL, and future president of Romania. (Monica Macovei, November 5th, 2014)

I gladly took note of the statements of Ms. Monica Macovei, in which she says that she wants to support me if I accept a series of conditions. I am glad to reaffirm that all these issues can be also found in my presidential program and some of them have been reaffirmed today by me (…). (Klaus Iohannis, November 6th, 2014)

Facebook was also used by politicians to clarify topics that were intensely discussed in news media. For example, after declaring on Facebook that he voted in

1990 with Ion Rațiu, a respected right wing candidate, Victor Ponta had to edit his message to explain how he was able to vote. This act was necessary after several journalists and politicians pointed towards the fact that during the 1990 elections, Ponta didn't have the necessary age to vote. As a result, Ponta declared:

> *For those who are asking questions about how I could not vote in 1990, I remind them about the existence of a law that, for that year, gave voting rights to all those who turned 18 during the year. So, I could vote in May, although I turned 18 in September.* (November 6th, 2014)

These results show that Facebook is used as a campaign resource by the Romanian politicians where they answer directly to their opponents' attacks or invitations, bypassing traditional news media. Facebook is also a place for the politicians to elaborate on strategic topics that are insufficiently discussed on traditional media, or that aren't adequately analyzed. Politicians interact on their SNS accounts to negotiate meaning in certain situations that directly impact their campaign strategies and goals. However, there were little interactions between the candidates for the second tour of the presidential elections regarding the diaspora vote. While Iohannis or Macovei tried to give an emotional definition of this situation, Ponta was rather technical, discussing the measures taken to facilitate the vote.

Discussion: same topics, different perspectives of the battlefield of meaning

The results of this study show that the politicians construct strategic narratives and turn to storytelling practices to produce their own definition of reality about their owned media. The topics discussed are chosen strategically. The allocated space for each subject is decided in accordance with the general campaign objectives. Overall, the Romanian political realm during the 2014 elections was strongly polarized. On the one hand, politicians who emphasized the diaspora vote problems (Iohannis, Macovei, Udrea) sought to mobilize emotions such as rage and hope in order to mobilize voters and to convince them to give a blame vote to authorities and the Government. On the other hand, politicians who weren't directly interested in the development of this issue, either avoided it (Tăriceanu), or integrated it into larger campaign themes (Ponta) in order to promote unity and cohesion. In each case politicians created tension and sought for resolutions to this tension. In the same time, politicians appealed to the representational force of strategic narratives to reinforce their power position in relation to their opponents. Not least, a discourse about 'Us' and 'Them' was created by both sides, meant to legitimize the political vision of each candidate.

In the same time, Facebook was used as a campaign resource, where debate topics were either launched on the media agenda, or clarified. Candidates used

Facebook both to promote their messages and political views, but also to interact with their opponents (launching political alliances or political attacks and answering to political attacks). Therefore, Facebook was not used as a one-way communication platform and with the sole goal of image promotion. This social network was also used to enhance horizontal communication between politicians and between politicians and journalists.

Another relevant result showed by this analysis is that politicians used strategies to mobilize voters – like 'go out to vote messages'; sharing campaign materials, which can be shared online; two step voter mobilization messages ('Call your parents or grandparents, your cousins or brothers tell them who you have decided to vote for. Tell them how you were held back from doing it, and ask them to do it for you', Iohannis); the use of hashtags. References to the political program were scarce and vague. Still, candidates such as Iohannis and Macovei provided useful information about the voting process. They also gave voice to the people on the street sharing their messages on their own Facebook pages. This way the political actors assumed the position of legitimate representatives of Romanian citizens' interests. Politicians did not directly encourage debates on their page, but through their strategies and messages, they encouraged offline interactions and actions (contacting others, convincing them to vote). As a result, a two-step communication flow (Jackson, Lilleker & Schweitzer, 2009) is being activated. Yet, politicians staged communication with voters – they seem very active, however do not come into direct interaction with them.

Based on these results, the answer to the first research question (RQ1) is that politicians use strategic narratives: national and issue narratives. They create a story about the Romanians who face different common enemies who stand between them and their democratic rights. On the one hand, there are the politicians (e.g. Iohannis, Macovei, Udrea) who speak against the establishment and its inability to assure the right to vote for all Romanian citizens. On the other hand, there are the politicians (e.g. Ponta) who speak about past enemies (e.g. Ponta's narrative against former president Basescu), who have to be defeated in order to reestablish solidarity and unity between Romanians. Both teams talk about the need to defend the democratic rights of the citizens and the need for unity in defeating the common enemies. However, they adopt different perspectives.

The answer to the second research question (RQ2) is that Facebook is not used at its full potential when it comes to developing a candidate's policies. However, this communication medium is either used exclusively for campaign promotion. In the 2014 presidential campaign, Facebook was for most politicians a platform for legitimation and voter mobilization. Even though direct interaction with voters was not a feature seen on any of the pages analyzed, politicians (such as Iohannis and Macovei) offered useful information about the voting process and shared

messages received from voters, giving them a voice in the political arena. As a result, the answer to the third research question (RQ3) is that politician-voter direct interaction on Facebook is still scarce. Yet, through the strategies used, political actors tried to involve voters in the campaign as message communicators.

Conclusions

During the 2014 presidential elections, Facebook had an important role for the communication of electoral messages. Even though the strategies used by politicians can still be circumscribed to promotional communication (as their messages and actions are part of a campaign strategy meant to bring positive image capital and voter support), a few elements have proven that Facebook is not essentially a promotional medium. There are still politicians who use Facebook in a classical manner, focusing mostly on their campaign agenda and constructing a one-way communication flow. However, in 2014 politicians had the opportunity to connect their online actions and messages with offline popular movements, which were fostered by the problems with the diaspora vote. In this process, citizens who were affected by the poor organization of elections received support from politicians online. Hashtags were created to bring together all their messages regarding the diaspora vote, videos and photographs of the ques were posted, messages form displeased voters were shared. For the first time voters were not only part of the online electoral messages of politicians but were also helped to organize offline. Given the emotional and the strong impact of presidential elections for the Romanian voters, a voting turnout of 62, 04 % was registered, almost 5% higher than in 2009 presidential elections.

Nevertheless, not all politicians addressed the issue of the diaspora vote in their online communication. Facebook is used as a strategic medium for the dissemination of the political actors' main campaign themes, but this doesn't always reflect the problems of the voters. Nonetheless, the 2014 elections offered a lesson for the Romanian political class in terms of online communication and the force of online social networks in mobilizing and organizing voters. It remains to be seen if what was achieved in 2014 in terms of online voter mobilization will be internalized by politicians and used in future elections. In this context, some might argue that the great voter mobilization in 2014 was fostered by a problem that had a strong emotional impact on voters, and in other conditions the mobilizing role of social media wouldn't have been as strong.

The results of this study offer relevant exploratory data, which can be further investigated in future longitudinal research. At this point, it is hard to draw definitive conclusions regarding the role of social media in the enrichment of democracy in Romania, as the result of this study cannot be generalized to the whole Romanian political realm. Even if the electoral year 2014 has brought new challenges for

politicians, it is necessary to check if the trends launched in 2014 will confirm in the future. At this point we can state at least hypothetically that campaigning in social media has raised the stakes for politicians, as Facebook is not only a complementary promotional medium, but it can have an impact in the setting of the electoral agenda. In the same time, politicians cannot use social media only as a one-way communication medium, ignoring the voice of the citizens especially in relation to sensible issues that can have an impact on democracy or on peoples' fundamental rights. Not least, news media and social media have become interdependent and each medium helps in balancing the overall political debate.

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