Facebook and Political Polarization: An Analysis of the Social Media Impact on the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue

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Abstract. *This article aims to analyse the power and the impact of social media on internal polarization and political mobilization by observing the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. Based on a theoretical framework on polarization, populism, and political mobilization, the article discusses the link between the use of social media and the support or rejection of the normalization of relations between the two countries. The analysis focuses on the most sensitive phase of the dialogue, in order to identify and examine the polarizing messages, populist content, and political mobilization used by institutional and opposition leaders in Kosovo. The results of this research show that Kosovo leaders follow conflicting and contrasting goals, viewpoints and positions, creating deep divisions among the public opinion and society internally, which will significantly undermine the prospects for a sustainable peace with Serbia.*

Keywords: Social media; Polarization; Political mobilization; Kosovo-Serbia dialogue; Peace.

Introduction

The use of social media has brought to attention the debate on whether these are platforms for the democratic exchange of information or if they are a tool contributing to polarization, radical rhetoric and ideological division (Iyengar & Hahn 2009, 19-39; Kirkpatrick 2010, 8). The expansion of Internet usage and of new media has increased the diversity, quantity, and the speed of flow of information to a degree that surpassed predictions of the possibilities of interactions between media and society. Varying and multiple social groups use such platforms to share their views, oppose one another's positions, and discuss outcomes of their work or to share different products (Millet *et al.* 2016). Political stakeholders haven't remained indifferent to these new realities. On the contrary, political stakeholders tend to use social media to present their positions, connect with their supporters, and recruit and gain support for their political goals. In this way, social media has become an integral and irreplaceable tool for political actors and civil society activists (Gerbaudo 2018a). In a complex and hyper connected world, it is only through such platforms that they can present their daily activity and gain support for short-term initiatives and strategic objectives (Winograd & Haise 2008).

Existing literature shows that new media has not only transformed decision-makers, political actors, and informal groups into news-sources, editors and distributers, which serve to communicate and to connect with constituencies, but in fact, every internet user is becoming an autonomous decision maker (Van Dijck 2009, 42-43) practicing their influence. Whoever has access to social media can be both the source and the disseminator of mediatized information. As a result of these new technologies, a major change in the relationship between transmitter and receiver of media content has taken place from the case of old media. Everyone is potentially a creator of new online content, which can include a message, text, image, or video, by interacting with others using one of these mediums. Online communication has changed the traditional way of mass-communication from the old media to the new media, by creating a new context for political communication (Chun *et al.* 2006; Levison 2009) with more opportunities and challenges. Initially, a low level of attention was paid to the political implications of new technology in changing political culture (De Zuniga *et al.* 2009, 553-574). Meanwhile, there has been some discussion on whether connections can be drawn between the return of populism and polarization with the spread of social media (Gentzkow & Shapiro 2015, 1799-1839).

The starting point of this article is that Kosovo is not an exception from these social and political trends, particularly in the role played by social media in political polarization. This article analyses and observes the power and the influence of social media in internal polarization and political mobilization in the case of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, showing an interesting situation of the role of social