

SOCIAL MEDIA – A TWO-EDGE SWORD IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGN: THE CASE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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DOI: 10.24989/ocg.338.28

Abstract

Social media, as interactive technologies, have given people unprecedented possibility to access information about elections and electoral contestants, to publicly express their opinions, interact with candidates, and get actively involved in electoral campaigns. This disruptive set of tools that allows and encourages individuals to engage in all stages of the political process, has become a powerful mechanism for political campaigns, in building and enhancing communication strategies.

The use of social media in politics dramatically changed the way campaigns are run. Social media provide useful platforms for electoral contestants, inclusively for those with limited resources, to present their agenda and mobilise a larger support base for their causes, at substantially lower costs. They offer the possibility for creation of shareable content that candidates and supporters can use to increase awareness, engage the targeted groups, and appeal for votes. However, the changes in the production and consumption of election-related content also raise a number of concerns that question the effectiveness of electoral rules, in their current form.

The aim of this paper is to underline the potential problems which have emerged and have been aggravated with the shift of political propaganda during election campaigns onto social media and identify safeguard measures that may be set in place to prevent abuse of the political process.

1. Introduction

In the age of digital democracy, the Internet has become an important tool for communication, providing unprecedented access to previously unattainable information. Production, processing and transmission of information through the Internet have a considerable impact on the political and socio-economic processes that occur in the Republic of Moldova, and in the world in general. The country managed to achieve good coverage in both wired and wireless communications infrastructure, boosting also the use of social media.³ These factors increased the use of the Internet, as the second most important source of information, including political news, talk-shows and information during the election campaign.⁴ With the development of technologies, traditional media also went digital,

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² The author is grateful to Liana Iacob, for support and advice, Law Firm “Budusan&Asociatii”, Bucharest, budusan.ro.

³ Although, the Internet penetration remains in 2019 at 71.4 %, telecommunications in Moldova are maintained at a relatively high-performance level. “Digital 2019: Moldova,” DataReportal, <https://datareportal.com/>.

⁴ According a survey Vox Populi held by Vox Populi in 2018, the most important source of information of the population is television - 73%, the Internet - 68%, the family - 37%, the radio – 32 etc. See “The Internet and the electoral process in the Republic of Moldova,” Sociologists and Demographers Association of Moldova, 2018

offering an alternative source for those who prefer the Internet as a primary source of information. Important segments in communication and dissemination of information are covered by social media.

Social media, as interactive technologies facilitating the creation or sharing of information, ideas and other forms of expression, are changing the nature of political communication, inclusively, in the electoral campaign. Loader and Mercea pointed out that the most obvious impact of social media upon democratic politics has been its disruptive capacity for traditional political practices and institutions. [19] The advent of social media opened new ways of promotion for the electoral contestants, offering the possibility to integrate these techniques into regular campaign planning. Importance of online political marketing can be seen in, among other factors, the major advantages offered by social networks, such as improvement of political engagement, increase of awareness and political interaction, and fostering of offline participation, by impacting political discussion, information, and political campaigning.

However, this increasing popularity has also a dark side: as social media grow in prominence, it is natural that people find ways to abuse it. The technology revolution has endangered the democratic process itself, as electoral campaigns on social networks have the capacity of massively influencing voters' decision. Nowadays unprincipled campaign practices are performed mainly online, by transmission of false information, and/or creation of alternative truths and realities, intended to influence the electoral outcome. The paper aims to reflect positive and negative sides of the use of social media in political campaign and identify necessary policies and measures apt to respond to the potential undermining of democratic legitimacy of the political process.

2. The use of social media in the Republic of Moldova

Until not long ago, all candidates, mainly, offered brochures, knocked on doors, organized meetings, and literally spread political messages through megaphones. Nowadays, conveying a political message across to the voters is the challenge that can be addressed by going digital. The candidates, using new media, have to demonstrate their proficiency to interact with people, to inform and mobilize their voters in these new ways. Social platforms have become new battlefields for political crusades, engaging electoral contestants and voters in a virtual relationship, in a manner and to an extent that traditional media could not offer. Modern political life revolves around "The Network", with its status updates, news feeds, comment chains, political advocacy, omnipresent reviews, rankings and ratings, and symbolic digital imagery that Internet users employ to express and communicate their support for various political causes and movements. [5]

The Republic of Moldova is also part of this trend. Recent data on the influence of social networks in the Republic of Moldova, obtained as a result of a survey conducted at the end of 2018, clearly shows that 66.6% of respondents use social networks to access information about the socio-political situation in the country.⁵ Among all social networks in Moldova, Facebook has undergone a rapid expansion, as the social network for majority of Internet users. The popularity of the well-known social network has caused Moldovan politicians to bend to the new current. The majority of them have created accounts. Facebook has established itself as a central platform for political communication, not only for militants of different political sides, but also for parties and politicians

⁵ Sociologists and Demographers Association, which attests to be the most popular the social network mentioned by the respondents is Facebook (34.2%). Another 25.9% of respondents mentioned that they use it for information about the socio-political situation in the country the Odnoklassniki network. Networks less popular social media are Vkontakte (4.7%) and Twitter (2%).

that now perceive and use their official Facebook pages as key tools of political communication. Arguably, such political communication is most important during election campaigns, when political parties and candidates seek to mobilise citizens, and persuade them to vote for a given party or candidate.

3. Positive aspects of political campaigning on social media

3.1. Going digital may enhance political campaign

Online social media tools play a crucial role in the successes and failures of numerous political campaigns and causes. A successful digital campaign can boost electoral candidate rating, and enhance the whole electoral campaign.⁶ In recent years, in the Republic of Moldova it has been attested an activation of political actors on social networks, using political marketing methods to mobilize their own electorate during, but also, outside election campaigns. Moldovan electoral competitors use social media tools to inform voters about their intention to apply, announce their candidate's lists, mobilize supporters, and submit signatures for registration as an electoral candidate.⁷ In addition, social media are always used to communicate and organise events that take place offline, by posting messages about upcoming events. Almost all political leaders in Moldova use these techniques to organise flash-mobs, meeting with voters, demonstrations and other events.⁸

Political digital marketing can highlight the candidate and his/her candidacy platform. By creating social media pages and profiles, politicians increase their visibility through likes and shareable content that could, in their view, create viral effects. The option for users to share, like, or retweet political messages instantly has opened up a new avenue for politicians to reach out the voters. By simply pressing the "like button" on Facebook on candidates' pages or by following them on Twitter, users can connect with the electoral contestant, as well as with other voters, and express or promote their views.

Indeed, a virtual presence increases the person's digital mileage. A website, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other such channels greatly benefit those politicians if he/she are able to show how relatable he/she can be. Message consistency across all candidate's channels, paired with a message that matches voters' political preference, increases the chances of voters' return, and, consequently, the chances to receive voters' support for his political discourse. Social sites offer more than the opportunity for politicians to inform on key objective of their political program. They also make the politician appear approachable and "mundane". For added credibility and likeability, electoral contestants often share their daily activities, thoughts or opinions on issues ranging from national importance to sensationalist events.

⁶ Perhaps one of the most obvious examples of political digital marketing in recent history is Donald Trump's digital campaign. Although it was certainly controversial, no one can deny the incumbent U.S. President's campaign was extremely effective.

⁷ The results of the monitoring exercise of political parties' pages have demonstrated that their activity in online space is prevalent focused on Facebook and Odnoklassniki, Youtube and in some cases on Instagram. All political parties have Facebook pages, not all have Facebook, and 8 out of 10 parties have Youtube channels.

⁸ These events, as a rule, garner much television, press and social media coverage.

3.2. Political leaders in direct connection

One of the most beneficial aspect of web-based social networking is the open door for voters to interact with political leaders. Indeed, social media offer the possibility for politicians to communicate with the electorate virtually, and provide a direct, real-time connection with the voters. In the past, if the voters need to meet a political leader, they have to attend an event. However, these events were not available for everybody for different reasons. With the advent of the Internet and, in special, of social media, voters have the possibility to “attend” virtual occasions, where they can interact with political leaders from the privacy and comfort of their homes.

Although politicians can communicate with the electorate virtually, it is necessary to emphasise that digital campaign cannot 100% replace door-to-door campaigns, or face to face meetings. First, not all citizens have access to the Internet and social media, thus a part of society may be excluded from political discussion on social media due to this “digital divide”. Second, certain category of voters, such as the elderly, still lean more towards more traditional ways of communication with the electoral contestants.

3.3. Increase the engagement and political participation of the young voters

Since the 2000s, democracy across the country has been characterised by the increasing disengagement of citizens and, particularly, of young voters. Active involvement of young people in political life exercises constitutes the key element in ensuring a sustainable development of the country. However, the participation of young people in these processes significantly decreased. This disengagement is not only characteristic for party membership and electoral registration, but also for the actual voting process. For instance, if the rate of young people (aged 18 to 25) was 10.11% in the 2016 presidential race [4], in the local elections of October 2019, it had already decreased to less than 7%. [25] The lack of interest in the political process, frequently negative opinions about politicians, and decreasing voter turnout are seen as clear signs of the diminishing legitimacy of the political system.

A reduced political and civic engagement among young voters is explained primarily by the disappointment in the political class: many young people see politicians as self-indulgent, self-centred, and indifferent to their interests. There are also and other reasons, such as systemic lack of political and democratic education, and lack of genuine opportunities to meet and interact with politicians.

Since most young people frequently use the Internet, and are active on social networking platforms, social media offer the possibility of encouraging more active participation in debates, and more widespread participation in the elections, factors helping to overcome the democratic deficit. Politicians have unique opportunity to dialogue online with their young voters, and educate a generation of young, responsible citizens in the spirit of democracy and genuine political engagement.

3.4. Social media can be used as a means for political targeting

Social media allows politicians to direct political messages towards certain target groups of voters. Voters targeting is defined as sending of an individualised message from a candidate to a group of voters, with the intent of influencing the group to evaluate the candidate favourably. [14] Political parties have always tried to tailor their political advertising to potential voters, based on their specific demographics and political leanings. To identify these voters, candidates’ strategists depend upon

development of large and sophisticated databases that contain personalised data about as many voters as possible.

An important goal of a targeting initiative is to know the target audience so well, that messages get delivered through the target's preferred communication channel. Although a candidate may have one concrete political message, how he/she speaks to his/her target voters may vary. Understanding the voting population on an individual level, enables campaign leaders to go beyond standard political party-oriented messages and communicate with voters about specific topics in order to influence the voter's decision. In the Republic of Moldova, targeting is a very used technique, intended to reach various category of voters, such as elderly people, young voters, sexual and ethnic minorities, groups of voters with different geo-political preferences etc.⁹ In creating such messages during campaigns, electoral contestants assume that members of these groups possess unique values or issue priorities, or are subject to distinctive framing because of shared characteristics.

However, targeting shall be a “dog whistle”, a sound only heard by a limited group that is ideally not heard by another group, for fear of how that group might react [19], otherwise candidate might portray for himself/herself a negative image in front of the non-targeted group. The risk is higher when these groups are subject to social bias, and/or less integrated with the mainstream population, since they often are perceived as threatening, such as Roma ethnic groups, sexual or religious minorities (e.g., as Muslims) etc.

4. Potential problems related to political campaigns on social media

The degree of brightness or darkness of social media is often a subjective matter. However, recent events have proved social media's potential for negative or detrimental consequences, inclusively on political campaigns, and on the outcome of elections. Facebook, Google, and Twitter, among others, have all been subjected to intense scrutiny because of the negative externalities that their services create. At the global level, a focus of concern has been the abuse of social-media channels, as part of efforts to influence the outcome of major political events. The June 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, and the U.S. presidential election later that year, are already textbook examples: in both cases, studies and intelligence reports show how nation-states and nonstate actors alike, exploited, manipulated, and abused social media as a tool of their “information operations.” [26] The role that social-media analytics firms played in these events was especially pronounced.

To see and understand the other side of the coin of the digital electoral activity in the Republic of Moldova, the answer to the certain questions should be sought: do political parties and their supporters aggressively use the internet, including social networks, in order to win elections? How such use fit into the realm of democracy? Bellow there are several problems may arise from and in relation to the use of new social media and related digital techniques in political campaigns, and their potential impact on the legitimacy and fairness of elections.

⁹ For instance, analysing the Dignity and Truth Platform Party (PPDA) campaign program, it can be easily noticed microtargeting of farmers, Moldovan diaspora, citizens which rights were violated by public authorities etc; the National Unity Party of Moldova (PUN) and the Liberal Party (PL) address mainly Moldovan citizens with Romanian identity and with unionist ideal, Christian values, European Union integrationist aspiration: the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova orientates its target messages for anti-NATO, anti-European Union, anti-Romanian, pro-Russian, anti-LGBT stance, that support nostalgia for the Soviet Union etc.

4.1. Transparency and the problem of tracking the sources of political campaign

In the Republic of Moldova, online electoral advertising is subject to regulations only in the segment covered by the financial reports of the parties or electoral competitors. In these reports, a sub-heading is dedicated to expenses for online advertising. Analysis of campaign money spending for each advertising sub-categories shows that electoral competitors allocated in average only 3% to online advertising for the parliamentary election of February 2019, and local election of October 2019.¹⁰

Promo-LEX Association experts, monitoring the polls, have repeatedly found that, in fact, electoral competitors report sporadically on the costs of Internet advertising, although, before and during the electoral campaigns, online portals abound in advertising of the parties, distributed automatically by Google. [1] Digital advertising could be hidden within larger categories of electoral expenses, such as market research, advertising and unsolicited campaign material. Identification of what constitutes “digital” is made based on the name of the provider. Although, Google or Facebook are notorious providers of advertising services on digital platforms, a lot of digital spending takes places via intermediaries such as advertising agencies or consultant businesses.

4.2. Negative campaigning on social media

In the digital era, the relationship between social media content, emotions, and user engagement is one of the most important question when attempting to understand politics. A large number of recent elections have been seen as largely driven on social media by campaigning dominated by a strong emotional stance. Although electoral contestants can opt out for a positive rhetoric, such as focus on promises for social improvement, welfare, and public services in their campaign, nowadays social media politics is dominated mostly by a strong emotionally negative charge, build on emotions, such as fear, hate, anger, and resentment. As a rule, these tools are used mostly by populist candidates and their supporters. However, in the Republic of Moldova, it was noticed the deployment of such means by all political opponents. For instance, in their attempts to put to end the hegemony of oligarchs, a system of nepotism, patronage, and entrenched corruption, political bloc “ACUM” developed, starting with the 2016 presidential race, a predominantly negative campaign, highlighted by negative emotions, such as hate and anger against oligarch and ex-leader of the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM), Vladimir Plahotniuc and his close allies.

Negative campaigning is often built around hate speech, orientated against electoral opponents and their supporters. European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) defines hate speech as promotion or incitement, in any form, of the denigration, hatred or vilification of a person or group of persons, as well as any harassment, insult, negative stereotyping, stigmatization or threat in respect of such a person or group of persons and the justification of all the preceding types of expression, on the ground of race, colour, descent, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, language, religion or belief, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation and other personal characteristics or status [10]. In the Republic of Moldova, all these forms of hate speech has a consistent presence in the virtual space, during and outside election campaigns. In the context of a divided society, geopolitical struggle, ethno-linguistic and religious tension, the aforementioned became efficient tools for the manipulation and generation of false problems and threats.

¹⁰ It is worth mentioning that in the case of Maia Sandu, leader of the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), in the first round of presidential elections of 2016 the party indicated that allocated over 70% of the budget for digital advertising, the internet being the priority medium for promotion, See Livia Țurcanu and Mihai Mogîldea, The activity of the political parties from Republic of Moldova in size online in the pre-election period, Monitoring report, Chisinau 2019.

A 2018 report shows certain political actors constantly use hate speech to divide society, including stereotypes and bias, orientated against some groups: unionists, women, LGBT, Muslims, refugees, Roma, Jews etc. [28] The same report showed that the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM) and “Sor” Party generated more hate speech than all other political parties together. [28] Since politicians are often considered by a significant part of the population to be the most important people in the state, their behaviour can root out prejudices and build attitudes, especially about phenomena insufficiently known to the public. As a rule, many candidates’ supporters internalize and multiply the hate speech on social media. Hate and discrimination promoted by politicians are dangerous not only because of the impact on media and the tensions they provoke in the society during campaigning: the real risk lies in the long-term effects.

Over the last years, social media has been invaded by two very current topics: unionism¹¹ and traditional values. Unionists attract much hate and criticism, not only from left-wing parties that have included anti-union slogans in their electoral programs, but also from right-wing political parties and their supporters. In fact, hate speech against unionism, and its supporters, reached the top aggressiveness level monitored over the last three elections. [28] Hate speech against unionism is fuelled also by the President of Republic Moldova, Igor Dodon, a strongly pro-Russian politician, and de facto leader of PSRM, who repeatedly spoke in favour of a bill draft, outlawing unionism and unionist parties.¹²

A body of empirical evidence suggests that social media favours negative content and negative communication tactics, as they are more effective than positive campaigning. [5] However, other studies argue the contrary, insisting that positive contents can attract a far higher level of user engagement than negative ones [11]. Focusing on the promise of social improvement through public spending, of welfare, health, and employment policies, and adopting a hope-driven call to vote to supporters, infused with positive terms such as *change*, *hope*, *together*, and *care*, make election campaign messages viral, and attract high user engagement. [11] In reality, it is more likely that dominance of negative or positive content in political discussions on social media, and their efficiency in mobilising voters, depend on particular societal circumstances, as well as on factors, such as the levels of voters’ education and, alternatively, frustration related to different political, economic and social conditions occurring in a specific country.¹³

4.3. Campaigning on wedge issues and society polarization

In the Republic of Moldova, microtargeting has come under fire many times, as a technique criticized for the potential to “manipulate” political debates and upcoming elections. Indeed, message targeting can have, also, a negative side, since it encourages contact and engagement only with those who are

¹¹ The unification of Romania and Moldova is a popular concept in the two countries beginning with the late 1980s, during the collapse of communism, due to the common history, traditions and language. The idea, while widespread in Romania, is only supported by 30% of population in Moldova. Individuals who advocate the unification are usually called “unionists”. The supporters of the union refer to the opponents as “Moldovenists” or “statalists”.

¹² See for instance, Igor Dodon wants to outlaw unionism, Observator, 29 June 2017, <https://observator.tv/extern/igor-dodon-vrea-sa-scoata-in-afara-legii-partidele-unioniste-din-republica-moldova-218543.html>.

¹³ See Pew Research Center, The political environment on social media, (2016), http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2016/10/24160747/PI_2016.10.25_Politics-and-Social-Media_FINAL.pdf; Allport G. W., Postman L., The psychology of rumor, New York: Russell & Russell, 1965; Garrett R.K., Weeks B.E., Neo R.L., Driving a wedge between evidence and beliefs: How online ideological news exposure promotes political misperceptions, in Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, vol. 21, no. 5 (2016); Garrett R.K., Troubling consequences of online political rumoring, in Human Communication Research, vol. 37. No. 2 (2011); Klein E., Robison R., Like, Post, and Distrust? How Social Media Use Affects Trust in Government, in Political Communication, vol. 37, no. 1 (2020).

deemed worthy of political campaigning (for instance, those in marginal seats or undecided voters), while simultaneously neglecting voters not regarded as strategically important.

The ability to micro-target political messages increases the likelihood that electoral contestants campaign on wedge issues. A *wedge issue* is a political or social issue, often of a controversial or divisive nature, which splits apart a demographic or population group. Typically, wedge issues have a cultural or populist theme, relating to matters, such as crime, national security, sexuality, abortion or race etc. A high number of such issues exist in the Republic of Moldova that, while highly divisive in a public forum, have the ability to mobilize voters, such as national language, idea of unification with Romania, sexual minorities, geopolitical issues, interference of the church in public affairs etc.

Wedge issues can also be advertised or publicly aired in an attempt to strengthen the unity of a population, with the goal of enticing polarized individuals to give support to an opponent or to withdraw their support entirely out of disillusionment. Electoral contestants use wedge issues to soften tension within a targeted group of population. However, a wedge issue may often be a point of internal dissent within an opposing party, which that party attempts to suppress or ignore discussing because it divides “the base”.¹⁴ Political scientist Schattschneider argued long ago that the effort of all political struggles “is to exploit cracks in the opposition while attempting to consolidate one’s own side.” [27] Therefore, a wedge issue intended to bring a contradictory debate within the opposing party gives the public a perception of disarray. In an extreme case, a wedge issue might contribute to the actual fracture of the opposing party as another party spins off, taking voters with it.

This, however, raises additional questions about the impact such of precise hidden campaigning and asymmetric informational flows has on the polarization of citizens. Wedge strategies might seem obsolete if the electorate has polarized along partisan and ideological lines, as is generally thought to be the case today in some political blocs in Moldova (e.g., bloc “ACUM”). The reality, however, is that in a complex and pluralistic society, political parties are inherently coalitions of diverse individuals. The choice of only two major parties ensures that some partisans will be incongruent on some issues, thereby creating policy cleavages within the party coalitions.

4.4. Social media and techniques for manipulating the electorate

Nowadays, people have come to associate online politics with their most antagonistic and incendiary aspects, such as trolling, political scandals, fake news and other “dirty” tactics. All of them are methods of manipulation, imposing the interests of a class, group, communities through misleading. These technologies are widely used, and inaccurate or false information flowing across them has a high profile.

Political manipulation is a latent management of the people’s political consciousness and behaviour, in order to force them to act (or not to act) in the interests of the manipulator. [2] For this reason, social media manipulation is an efficient and powerful tool, used against political opponents in situations of divergence of interests and ideology. The methods used to manipulate public opinion are multiple. However, this paper analyses only the most frequently used in political speech with the purpose to misinform voters.

¹⁴ For instance, Maia Sandu, ex-prime minister of the Republic of Moldova and leader of PAS avoid including such issue in her political campaign as she declared that “the politicians speculate on the topic of union with Romania, which lead to the division of the society.” Unionist parties and their supporters treated this declaration with disapproval. See for instance, “Maia Sandu for the Russian press: “Union with Romania, subject of speculation that divides society,” [deschide.md, https://deschide.md/ro/stiri/politic/52133/Maia-Sandu-pentru-presura-rus%C4%83-](https://deschide.md/ro/stiri/politic/52133/Maia-Sandu-pentru-presura-rus%C4%83-).

a) *Denigrating a political opponent with accusations that cannot be verified immediately or at all*, since the opponent has parliamentary immunity, or with corrupt facts in the media, such as compromising materials on the opponent. Because of them, the candidate's rating may fall significantly. Accurate information can also be used strategically, as when confidential communication is leaked (often selectively) in order to cast a political opponent in a negative light [15]. However, compromising material can have also an opposite effect: when "dirt is very tough", people will begin to feel sorry for the person and, thereby, will raise his rating (the 'rooting for the underdog', as an often-underestimated social phenomenon). Therefore, many electoral contestants use third parties, such as trolls, supporters or media, to launch certain themes or attacks, while placing themselves in a neutral position. This technique is intensely exploited in order to manipulate the electorate by launching negative press campaigns, before triggering direct political attacks.

Trolling, which is now mainstream in political debate, is especially successful in dividing opponents' electorate. Trolls disseminate readily deceptive information as factual information, which includes, but is not limited to lies, fake news, conspiracy theories, and rumours to change electorate cognition or beliefs. This dark current of people who equate free speech with the right to say anything, even hate speech, find on social media platforms a place where their opinions can have a multiplier effect, where they become the elites.

b) *Launching official rumours/fake news and intoxications on social media*. Politicians or mass-media always use phrases such as "credible", "official", or "internal sources" to launch messages that are often untrue, without assuming any responsibility for these actions. Inaccurate beliefs and falsehoods undermine democratic processes by distorting decision making, threatening the very foundations of democracy. Support for a candidate or policy that he/she promotes depends fundamentally on what one believes, and "falsehoods can color individuals' judgments, potentially leading them to support positions that run counter to their self-interests" [18]. In the Republic of Moldova, a significant number of informative portals and blogs, that frequently publish content stories appearing bona fide, but serving as primary source for the dissemination of manipulative content. Instances of "media forgeries", which are subsequently taken over by television and disseminated as credible information, also occur. Advancing conspiracy theories, which weave together truth and fiction in ways that appear to justify attributing social phenomena to a small but powerful group of self-interested individuals, are a related approach. Certain fake news sites are not by any means entertaining, and only exist to invade uninformed voters with misleading content, or, alternatively, troll them. Perhaps one of the most notorious fake news was about presidential candidate Maia Sandu, alleged "to have had an agreement with German Chancellor Angela Merkel to receive 30,000 Syrian immigrants if she wins the presidential elections".¹⁵ When the news was disseminated, some Moldovans were indeed panicked about a "massive" wave of Syrian refugees, withdrawing their electoral support.

It is getting increasingly harder to isolate genuine news from fake news on the Internet. Social media makes this refinement particularly complicated, by displaying a consistent stream of images, connections, and gossips about political leaders, which is often in most of cases a blend of truths, and outward lies. Bakir and McStay affirm that the contemporary fake news phenomenon is a logical outcome of five features of digital media ecology: the financial decline of legacy news; the news cycle's increasing immediacy; the rapid circulation of misinformation and disinformation via user-generated content and propagandists; the increasingly emotionalised nature of online discourse; and the growing number of people financially capitalising on algorithms used by social media platforms

¹⁵ Initially this fake news was reported by portal guralumii.md, after was disseminated by other news portal and blogs.

and internet search engines. [3] In a complex information environment, individuals have cognitive limits and biases, which make them susceptible to political misinformation. Moreover, a study suggests that people find messages to be more believable the more familiar those messages are [7]. Therefore, repeated contact with falsehoods shared online will increase the validity judgments of those statements, encouraging their acceptance and creating illusory truths. More importantly, people are susceptible to believe messages that affirm their identity or political viewpoint, regardless of the strength of the evidence [20].

If fake news or rumours only aim at putting a particular message into circulation, the intoxication techniques are much more subtle. Polls, ratings and rankings, formative tests or televised debates are some of the methods currently used for misleading or creating false trends favourable to certain topics or making and promoting false political personalities.

c) *Affective compassion is another way of handling public opinion.* When citizens are generally ill-informed, and lack ideological constraint, trait-based heuristic strategies represent an opportunity to understand why some campaigns succeed and others fail. Compassion appeals are likely to be used by all candidates early in a campaign to develop a candidate's image and shore up partisan support.

Since voters want a politician who “cares about people like them”, they look for politicians who are compassionate because they believe that candidate can be trusted to look out for their best interests. Often, political leaders make use of this weapon to get sympathy and support of voters based on so called identity-based empathy. [17] When the candidate and the voters share salient identities, it expresses the candidate's ability to understand how people live and the belief systems dominate their thought processes. However, the candidate can create an image that does not correspond to the reality, trying to persuade the voters that “he is like them and part of them”. The message “I am like you”, and “care about people like you” has a positive perception among voters, especially when candidate portrays an image of a person that share similar traditional values as majority of voters. For instance, in the presidential election of 2016, PRSM's candidate Igor Dodon built an image family man supportive for traditional family and Orthodox church, that are common values for most of the Moldovan voters. By contrary, with the help of mass-media affiliated to PSRM, his opponent - Maia Sandu, was portrayed as a childless, unmarried woman, and supportive of LGBT. Since stereotypes are too much rooted in the Moldovan society, these tactics helped Dodon gain more votes than his opponent.

Having a positive perception of a leader can make citizens to find excuses when the politician fails, or to give them credit for achievements that, objectively, might have been out of their control. Obviously, most voters lack the time or interest to understand the intricacies of policy-making, nor is it necessarily reasonable to demand that from them. [21] Without these important factors to influence voting decisions, voters will fall back on their perceptions of whether a candidate is a good person who truly cares about people like them.

d) *Labeling* is also an important element of language manipulation in election campaign. This method allows to discredit a person or an idea, for example, to present a patriot as “fascist”, or a person that has a different opinion than majority as a “traitor”. For instance, Andrei Nastase, PPDA leader, was labelled as a “village fool” by Igor Dodon, incumbent president of the Republic of Moldova, only because he withdrew his candidacy in favour of Maia Sandu, PAS leader in the 2016 presidential race. More recently, when PUN leader, Octavian Ticu, was labelled a “traitor” by some of his MP colleagues, and their social media followers, only because he had opposed and criticised a long-term coalition with the PSRM, which also was considered toxic by civil society.

Labelling is based on stereotypes in the mass consciousness, which in the Moldovan society are particularly difficult to overcome, due to misinformation and poor democratic and political education of voters.

e) *Deviating the attention from the important problems in society* it is another manipulation tactic, achieved by launching false topics of general interest, usually of a scandalous nature. This tactic, as a rule, is used by politicians /electoral contestants in order to silence other aspects that could really disturb public opinion, or hurt them personally, e.g., when related to their activity, person or circumstances.

Other used tactics are exaggeration of the stake, the consideration of conformism, keeping population in mediocrity etc.

4.5. Intermediaries – new actors in the electoral process

The rise of digital intermediaries, such as search engines and social media is profoundly changing our media environment. This powerful gatekeeper position enables them to facilitate or impede information dissemination. Epstein and Robertson have highlighted that search engines have the potential to influence the electorate's attention and voting preferences, showing that a biased search engine result ranking can shift undecided voters towards one candidate. [9] Search rankings can in turn affect voter preferences, these phenomena might interact synergistically, causing a substantial increase in support for one candidate at some point even when the effects of the individual phenomena are small. The scholars pointed out that "the process by which search rankings affect voter preferences might interact synergistically with the process by which voter preferences affect search rankings, thus creating a sort of digital bandwagon effect that magnifies the potential impact of even minor search ranking manipulations." [9] The effect is particularly important for elections with a limited number of closely ranked candidates. [6]

Some online platforms, such as Google or Twitter, have introduced policies aimed at identifying political campaigning and bringing it comply with applicable laws of the state in which they are being run. However, there is no guarantee that when the business/ideological interests of the political party and online platform align, the later may not favour the respective electoral contestant over his opponents to reach their supporters. This could lead to new forms of corruption and manipulation that are not captured by existing rules that focus mainly on broadcasting and that cross-jurisdiction boundaries.[22]

5. Regulating social media in the Republic of Moldova

According to Article 52 of the Electoral Code, "the citizens of the Republic of Moldova, the parties and other social-political organizations, the electoral blocks, the candidates and their trustworthy persons have the right to submit freely and under all aspects the electoral programs of the electoral competitors, the political, professional and personal qualities of the candidates, as well as to conduct electoral campaign in meetings, rallies, meetings with voters, through mass media, by displaying electoral posters or through other forms of communication." [8] The Electoral Code does not contain separate provisions for the promotion of electoral messages on social media, but electoral advertising on the Internet is assimilated to offline advertising. Posts on social media are attributed to offline content, and they are compared to messages that are posted on billboards. The problem is that in the both cases, it is neither restricted nor monitored, as is the case of the political advertising aired by the broadcasters and monitored by the Broadcasting Coordinating Council (CCA). For instance,

restrictions are in place for broadcasters these are restrictions regarding airing time when placing electoral advertising. However, these restrictions do not apply to internet advertising. Lack of Internet regulation may affect the capacity of the bodies responsible for the supervision of the electoral campaign to penalize offences committed online by the electoral competitors.

Some restrictive measures for conducting an electoral campaign have been developed by the Electoral Central Commission (CEC) and the Broadcasting Coordinating Council (CCA). They concern certain key issues, such as non-discriminatory or instigative language, correct and not-distorted display of electoral contestants' messages by broadcasters, prohibition of hate speech or sexist messages, prohibition to use different national symbols, images representing state institutions, public authorities for electoral advertising purposes, both within the country and abroad, or international organizations etc.

The existing regulations are based on traditional media and should be reviewed and complemented by measures aimed to regulate social media and other digital technologies to prevent democratic failures and protect the legitimacy of democratic processes.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

Social media can be strategically important during election campaigns. Due to the increasing number of users and existing settings for the distribution of information on social media platforms, their influence on voting results is substantial. Without any doubts, online campaigns tend to gradually replace the classic ones, however, without causing their complete disappearance. Politicians express increased preference for the new media, as they allow more freedom, with very few (if any) regulatory control keys.

The content of online campaigns messaging remains a material issue of concern, absent regulations or standard settings. Bodies monitoring elections and regulators should concern themselves more with issues such as message targeting, redlining and the undermining of deliberation. In many areas, more active standard setting could be desired and fruitful. As the risk of underlying motivations, of undermining democratic institutions and of casting doubt on election results remains a major concern, democratic state actors should update their approaches, practices and regulations, at state-of-the-art technological standards. This process is intrinsically difficult, if only taking into account the ever-evolving nature of technology, and the speed at which its evolution occurs; as well as, at a minimum, the need to safeguard fundamental rights, such as freedom of speech and other open-society values; to the effect that the outcome might not be optimal. It remains, however, a sad fact that, with few, if notable exceptions, material steps in this direction are yet to be taken at both national and international level. The inability of regulation to level the playing field for political contest and limit the role of money in elections, especially on social media, causes major disruptions to the democratic process.

Social media is far more complex, with myriads of actors and contents. On social media, some private or anonymous accounts/sites/users that carry political content may have a wide reach, but it may not be easy to identify them. Therefore, relevant national authorities, such as the CEC and the CCA, may consider monitoring online political advertising and campaigning in the overall electoral campaign context, and establish more specific quotas, limits and reporting categories for online electoral spending. In order for monitoring authorities to move towards these goals, cooperation with civil society, as well as information exchange should be increased, and good practices in social media monitoring developed and implemented. Cooperation shall be established with (at least) major

internet platforms, so that the former can raise concerns in time and provide their findings regarding abuses to respective mentoring authorities.

A wide, objective review of the ability of the legal framework to ensure a fair, clean and clear electoral campaign should be conducted. Definitions of the cost of campaigning should be expanded to include consultancy and database costs that relate to campaign spend, or a shift to donation limits rather than spending limits should be considered. A media law is necessary, which will provide for new and innovative measures to ensure transparency, data protection requirements for platforms and intermediaries, which also play a crucial role in political campaign.

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