

**USER MOBILIZATION AND PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS.
A CASE STUDY FROM ROMANIA****ANDRA ANDRONICIUC***PHD CANDIDATE, ALEXANDRU IOAN CUZA UNIVERSITY OF IASI, ROMANIA*andra.androniciuc@gmail.com**ANA MARGARIDA BARRETO***ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, UNIVERSIDADE NOVA DE LISBOA, PORTUGAL*ambarreto@fesh.unl.pt**Abstract**

The rapid development of the internet and online social networks, together with the increasing number of users have led to a growing use of online social networks in the political field both by citizens and political actors. In this context, more and more studies have started to argue the use of social media as stimulators of dialogue, interactivity and feedback. Even if the literature on this subject is extensive for the Western democracies, the case is different for the emerging democracies, like Romania. Therefore, this paper aims at gaining insight into the use of online social networks by Romanian political actors as triggers of online participation and mobilization, namely engagement manifested through Facebook buttons like, comment and share. In order to do so, we selected the Romanian political campaigns from 2014 (presidential elections) and 2016 (parliamentary elections) and conducted a content and statistical analysis on the posts published on politicians' official Facebook pages over the four weeks leading up to Election Day. Our findings indicate that the political actors put their efforts into spreading information but mostly missed the opportunity offered by this network to trigger mobilization and participation.

Key words: social media, Romania, political campaigns, elections

JEL Classification: M31

1. Introduction

The surprising evolution of the internet caught the attention of political actors, who started to incorporate this new medium into their campaigns (Williams & Gulati, 2007; Wattal, Schuff, Mandviwalla, & Williams, 2010; Towner & Dulio, 2011). From the perspective of political institutions, using social media in political communication is essential, especially in the context of electoral campaigns. Zeng et al. (2010) argue that social media are very useful to evaluate public opinion on public policy and to create community support for candidates. During the recent years, the evolution of political communication has shown that modern politicians are open to using social networks to communicate directly with their electorate. Often, the main purpose of using social networks is to inform citizens about policy initiatives and to engage in direct conversation with them.

The use of the Internet for political communication has begun in the United States of America, Aparaschivei (2011) identifying 1992 as the year of a new communication approach in electoral campaigns. Since that year, candidates have begun to publish their online discourses and discover the benefits of this new medium of communication. The year 2000 is an important milestone in the evolution of online communication, candidates starting to use campaign websites as well as email marketing. In 2004, the political blogs emerged and in 2006 social networks started to be integrated in political communication.

In Romania, social networks started to be used in 2008, but it was not until 2012 elections that political actors actively integrated them in their communication strategy. The current study is the only one of this kind as it takes a look at both the 2014 and 2016 elections, in an attempt to see if the Romanian politicians enabled participation and mobilization in their online campaigns.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section provides a literature review on the use of social networks in political campaign; section 2 presents the research questions and methodology; in the third section we discuss the findings; section 4 invites to discussions and gives an outlook for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social media and political campaigns

According to Boyd and Ellison (2008), Nicolás Ojeda (2012) and López García et al (2015), social media represent online services accessible from web platforms that allow users to connect with each other, publish content in different formats (textual, documentary, graphic, audio or audiovisual) and consult or share content disseminated by others, with whom they can directly interact. López García et al (2015) distinguishes between social networks focused on the creation and distribution of content, such as blogs, discussion forums, wikis or media, exchange or aggregation of video or images such as YouTube, Instagram and Pinterest, social networks focused on recommendation and selection of content, such as Digg, Reddit Delicious or Menéame; virtual communities, platforms based on creating relationships between users with a purpose general or specific, such as Facebook, Google+ or Tuenti; and microblogging networks, as Twitter. According to Caldevilla Domínguez (2010), virtual communities and microblogging networks are characterized by the potential interactivity, the instantaneity, the wide accessibility of users to the content, the predominance of horizontality in the relationships between users, the personalization of the content, the multimedia character of the contents and the possibility of exchanging author-reader roles. In the late 1990s, during the election campaigns, many parties created websites for their candidates, including, in some cases, forums and live chats with the candidate, as a way to bring politicians closer to citizens (Medran, 2007). Subsequently, with the arrival of the phenomenon of blogs in 2002, various politicians, generally those who did not hold high positions in the office, began to actively use them. The first blogs allowed comments from users; nowadays, many political blogs have a personal web page in a blog format, but without allowing the exchange of opinions, such as comments.

Even if social networks have started to be embraced worldwide, there are still political actors who are reluctant to using social networks. Giansante (2015) argues that there is a generational gap that makes many public officials and party leaders show great scepticism, if not complete rejection towards new technologies. They claim personal contact is the most important tool of political persuasion. Despite this, most politicians are using the new technological means, although many of them use the Internet as a complementary tool, but not substitutive, of offline activities. In this respect, Tunez and Sixto (2011) argue that social networks are still undervalued by politicians, and consider that limiting the use of social networks is a mistake, because citizens who follow a politician no longer expect to receive unidirectional messages, but to interact and engage in dialogue. According to Turiera-Puigbo (2009) we are witnessing a redefinition of the rules of the game of political communication and the political representatives seem to be obliged to adapt to this situation, as it is no longer an option to limit to opportunistic use of the messages in the electoral campaigns; now, due to the emergence of new tools in web 2.0, the politicians must account for day-to-day management.

There are several reasons why internet marketing has changed and continues to change political communication (Utz, 2009; Ward and Janelle, 2010; Schmitt-Beck and Mackenrodt, 2010; Pedersen, 2012; Mascheroni Mattoni, 2013). The first reason is speed. Internet speed helped change the political campaigns in a way that previous technologies were unable to. An event published on the internet has the same effect as an event broadcast on radio or television, but it can be accessed immediately during and after its production (Utz, 2009). Speed in this case is more important than anything else (Schmitt-Beck and Mackenrodt, 2010). Moreover, the Internet has the advantage of being very easy to use, providing access to information 24 hours a day. Another important aspect is that

politicians can now communicate virtually with voters, without any geographic limitations. More and more institutions and political actors are using Twitter, Facebook, Google+, LinkedIn, YouTube etc. to interact with voters (Towner & Dulio, 2011). Quick checks became more efficient using Google, Bing or Yahoo as users can search for statistics, information or definitions within seconds. In 2008, Google revealed that during political debates Google searches increased significantly. What is more, social networks have changed the concept of political debate (Stieglitz & Xuan Brockmann, 2012); now, voters can express their wishes and be heard not only in the community they belong to, but in the entire world. Ríos (2016) believes that the main advantages of using Facebook in a political context are: its flexibility that allows it to be used in all types of campaigns; ease of use, making this network accessible to all audiences; the ability to instantly evaluate the effect of posts; their global spread, which allows political actors to reach their target audiences without geographical boundaries; the multiplier effect of the message resulting from user interaction; the ability to pay to promote posts. What is more, Facebook fulfils both the informative and mobilizing function, by transmitting targeted messages and mobilizing users. Stieglitz and Xuan (2012) explain why political actors should be present on social networks. They argue that social media allow political actors to identify political opinion leaders and the main topics they address, especially during electoral campaigns. At the same time, being present on social networks help politicians identify the main problems of the communities and predict possible topics that can be debated in the future. For the candidates, the ultimate goal of being present on social networks is to get to know their electorate well and to get ready for the potential attacks coming from opponents. At the same time, Facebook increases candidates' chances of reaching to young people who are not interested in the political sphere and who usually do not participate to political events and not get their information from traditional means of communication.

However, Ren and Meisters (2010) consider that the simple use of social networks does not automatically lead to an increased number of voters. Success depends mostly on the updated information and online interaction between politicians and voters. One of the most common mistakes made by politicians is using Internet 2.0. in the same way they used Internet 1.0 (Lamarre & Suzuki Lambrecht, 2013). In web 2.0, the key is interacting with participants. Towner & Dúlio (2011). Participation is essential given that the new media require users to be active not only in the distribution of political content, but also in communicating the message of the campaign.

2.2. Online participation and mobilization in social media

The volume of participants and the possibility of controlling the message transformed social networks into an ideal tool to gain followers in political activity, both in the planning of large campaign actions as well as in interpersonal communication. However, if the politicians really want to engage with their users, they need to do more than having a blog or accounts on social networks (Túñez and Sixto, 2011). In the framework of political communication, the use of new technologies has led to the appearance of descriptive terms of the new interaction scenario: "Democracy 2.0", "Commitment 2.0" (Túñez and Sixto, 2011), "Cyberdemocracy" (Dader and Campos, 2006) or "Attitude 2.0", adopted by Casero Ripolles (2009), all of these terms indicating that participation must go beyond mere presence on the social networks and that requires active contribution, through the exchange of opinions and content.

If there is a period in which the Internet is considered important for political parties this is the electoral campaigns, but there are politicians who create a profile on social networks or start a blog before the elections to try to gain more votes, and stop using it after the elections, which translates into a situation of electoral opportunism. The Internet users are usually aware of this situation and easily detect the propaganda use given by certain politicians to digital platforms (Conroy, 2012). According to Kaplan (2010), each social network has guidelines for behaviour and a form of own communication and it is necessary to know them, understand them and use them in order to take advantage of these

communication tools. The author explains that it is not enough to open a profile on several social networks and dedicate to increasing the number of followers, but that social networks should be used as "means of alternative communication (Kaplan, 2010).

More and more studies argue that is necessary that the political actors make better use of the online social networks and start using them as a valid instrument for establishing dialogue, educating citizens and encouraging their political and civic participation (Carlos Ballesteros Herencia et al, 2017; Sudulich et al., 2010; Bronstein, 2012; Delany, 2009; Gerodimos and Justinussen, 2013). That is, they need to generate change, from the participatory attitude to the action of participating. Nonetheless, an increased number of studies indicate that SNS are more commonly used as tools of disseminating information and propaganda strategy, and not as mechanisms to favour citizen participation in the political and civic field (Vallespín, 2011).

In the European environment, Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff and Van't Haar (2013) agree that candidates use networks as a form of unidirectional communication and only exceptionally for mobilization or consultation. According to the study about 2015 Spanish elections conducted by Carlos Ballesteros Herencia et al (2017), the main communication objective was to raise the awareness about the candidates. Only 12.4% of the messages tried to mobilize the followers of Facebook. The messages where the candidates asked directly for vote represent 4.1%, those asking for virtual mobilization through internet actions 3.0%, and those requested donations reached 0.6%. Therefore, the messages that did not intend to mobilize accounted for 87.6% of the total, with the majority being experiential narrative (35.4%), electoral descriptive information (20.7%). The study also emphasizes that the PP, despite being the party with the most number of posts on Facebook, was the one with the lowest percentage of mobilizing messages published.

Numerous studies (Bor, 2013; Bronstein, 2012; Delany, 2009; Gerodimos and Justinussen, 2013; Gueorguieva, 2008; Katz et al, 2013; Lilleker and Jackson, 2010; Sudulich et al, 2010; Westling, 2007; Williams and Gulati, 2007) synthesize three main functions of social networking, and especially Facebook: dissemination and exchange of information, donations, mobilization of users and recruitment of volunteers. In his study about the 2012 USA election, Bronstein (2012) concludes that both candidates used social networks as platforms for raising economic and social capital, asking for donations, recruiting volunteers and asking user to share information. Obama and his counter-candidate, Romney, requested donations in 18% and 31% of their Facebook messages, used volunteer recruitment messages in 1.62% and 4.56% of messages, and asked to share information in 22.9% and 7.16% of cases. Another study by Gerodimos and Justinussen (2013) indicates a prominence of mobilizing messages in Obama's campaign in 2012, with 69% of mobilizing messages. Within them, most of the messages ask users to share the messages (36%), 15.9% ask for vote, and 13.3% for donations.

At the same time, various studies by Gil de Zuñiga, Puig and Rojas (2009) support the influence of social networks in mobilizing voters. Williamson (2010) described how Facebook and YouTube served to coordinate events, encourage citizens to organize events and make donations. Previously, Westling (2007) highlighted the strengths of Facebook during the election campaign, as it allows candidates to reach to voters, providing them with the means to mobilize and organize large groups of volunteers. In Romania, a relevant study was carried by Aparaschivei, who conducted an integrated analysis of the entire electoral strategy of social networks in the 2009 election campaign in Romania. Aparaschivei analyzed how the politicians of his country used Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and the spaces of personal blog and concluded the Romanian politicians make poor use of the benefits of social media, focusing on rather informing than engaging with the users (Aparaschivei, 2011).

In addition, a doctoral work done in 2012 by Agnes Tamas at Babeş-Bolyai (2012) University in Cluj-Napoca, which analyses the 2012 Romanian elections concludes, among others, that on the pages of political parties the interactivity remains low. Data collected over three months show that

there are significant differences between the number of Facebook visitors and the number of real interactions. Another work conducted in 2014 by Tănase Tasește (2014) indicates that the Facebook pages of politicians are used by political actors more as a source of dissemination of the political message to their social groups and less as a space of debate and interaction with voters. The author also confirms that the higher the commitment rate and the People Talking About indicator, the higher the number of Facebook fans.

2.3 Online social networks statistics

According to statistics (Grigorescu, 2017), the most popular online social networks worldwide are Facebook - with 2.01 billion users in mid-2017, Youtube - with 1 billion users, Instagram - 700 million users, Twitter - 328 million users, Reddit - 250 million users, Comes - 200 million users Ask.fm (a network where users ask questions and get answers) 160 million users, Pinterest - 150 million users, Tumblr - with 115 million users, Flickr - with 112 million users. Since mid-2016, the top five positions in the top countries with most Facebook users are occupied by India with 195.16 million users, the United States, with 191.3 million users, Brazil with 77.58 millions of users, Indonesia with 77.58 million users and China with 52.87 million users (Avadanei, 2016).

If we take a look at the situation of active users in Romania, we see that 2008, 56,000 Romanians owned a Facebook account. The number has significantly increased by 2010, as it reached more than 1.5 million users. At the end of 2017 there were 9.6 million active users. In 2014, the Romanian president Klaus Iohannis became the first politician in Europe to reach one million fans on Facebook, surpassing Merkel, Sarkozy and Hollande. Klaus Iohannis is followed by former prime minister Victor Ponta, with 825 048 fans, general mayor of Bucharest Gabriela Firea - 483 124, former president Traian Basescu - 398 469, former Parliament member Elena Udrea - 372 675 and former prime minister Dacian Cioloș- 315 278. When it comes to the Romanian parties, the most popular party on Facebook is the National Liberal Party with 255 359 fans, followed by the Social Democratic Party - 68 560 and Save Romania Union - 61 480 (Facebrands, 2018).

3. Research questions and methodology

The literature review we conducted has led us to the following research questions and hypothesis:

RQ1: What kind of messages did the Romanian political actors use in their online campaigns?

RQ2: What were the effects of those messages on user engagement?

H1: Mobilizing messages are expected to lead to higher engagement among users.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the use of social networks by Romanian politicians, by analysing the 2014 presidential elections and 2016 parliamentary elections. In order to do so, we selected the two finalists for the 2014 presidential elections, Klaus Iohannis and Victor Ponta and the three parties with the highest numbers of votes at the 2016 parliamentary elections: PNL (The National Liberal Party), PSD (The Socialist Party) and USR (The Save Romania Union).

In our attempt to investigate if the Romanian politicians used the key features of social media like dialogue, interactivity and feedback, we analysed if they used mobilizing content and enabled online participation when interacting with the users. Furthermore, we analysed if the mobilizing content triggered a higher engagement from the users, manifested through Facebook buttons like, comment and share. We conducted a content and statistical analysis on the posts published on politicians' official Facebook pages during the electoral campaigns. In Romania, regulations allow 30 days of official campaign, so we selected that period of time for this analysis. This led to a sample of 243 posts in the case of presidential elections and 318 for the parliamentary ones, but we only took into consideration 222, respectively 282, and excluded posts that contained only photos or videos or announced candidates' presence at a TV show. For the analysis, we used only the text of the posts, without considering the video or the graphic content

The messages were coded by the authors in categories already used in previous studies on electoral campaigns through social networks (Giansante, 2015; Ballesteros et al, 2016; Díez-Garrido and Ballesteros, 2016; Muñiz and Ballesteros, 2016; Gerodimos and Justinussen, 2015; Macintos, 2006), but adapted to the Romanian elections’ particularities. The categories we used were:

1. *Online participation* (Macintos, 2006): (1) e-Enable; (2) e-Engage/e-Empower.

According to Macintos (2006), there are 2 possible stages in online participation: 1)e-Enable (or one way communication) – the candidate shares information on his page, without trying to establish a dialogue with the users; (2)e-Engage/e-Empower (two ways communication) - the candidate takes the next step in the interaction with the users, asking for followers’ feedback or/and giving them responsibilities to fulfil (for example, to share messages, to find new supporters in the online community, to enter the website etc.).

2. *Mobilization* (Ballesteros et al, 2016; Díez-Garrido and Ballesteros, 2016; Muñiz and Ballesteros, 2016): (1) Don’t ask for mobilization; (2) Asks for virtual mobilization; (3) Asks for offline mobilization.

(1)The category of non-mobilizing message integrates all the messages that do not contain a call to action, but focused on endorsing political platform, presenting the candidate or attacking the opponent.

(2)The second category includes messages that ask users for their virtual participation on Facebook, such as: “Like/share this message to show your support for the candidate”, “Leave a comment and tell us your opinion”, “What do you think about...?” “Change your profile picture with this one to show your support”. “Visit candidate’s website to find out more about [...]”.

(3)Finally, in the third category we placed the messages inviting users to show their support to the political actors in the offline environment: “Go to vote”, “Meet with the candidate”, “Enter our team of volunteers”, “Donate”.

In the coding process, the categories were interpreted in dichotomous categories, sorted by present (1) or absent (0) for each post. Some of the posts were included in both *Ask for virtual mobilization* and *Ask for offline mobilization*, as they contained elements belonging to both categories (e.g. “If you agree with us, share this message on your page and come to vote”). The process required two coders, to eliminate bias and sources of error in the protocol.

3. *Online reactions* (engagement) – manifested through the Facebook buttons Like, Comment, Share.

4. Findings

4.1.Presidential elections

4.1.1 Mobilization and online participation

Overall, the findings indicate differences between the strategies adopted by the political actors in the online campaigns. In the case of presidential elections, for Iohannis the key communication objective was to get closer to his users, the candidate placing at the centre of his communication the online community. At the same time, messages containing a call to action or attacking the opponent were also common. For Iohannis endorsing his political programme was not a priority, as he used Facebook especially to gain audience’s sympathy and support, trying to get close to it. On the other side, his opponent Victor Ponta dedicated many of his messages to presenting his political programme and barely uses mobilizing messages.

The findings indicate a clear difference between the candidates when it comes to using messages containing a call to action. Ioahannis’ campaign focused on getting both online and offline support; as a result, 34% of the total messages contain incentives to get involved in the campaign. By contrast, Ponta’s online strategy did not place emphasis on call to action messages, only 7% of the posts including this kind of message.

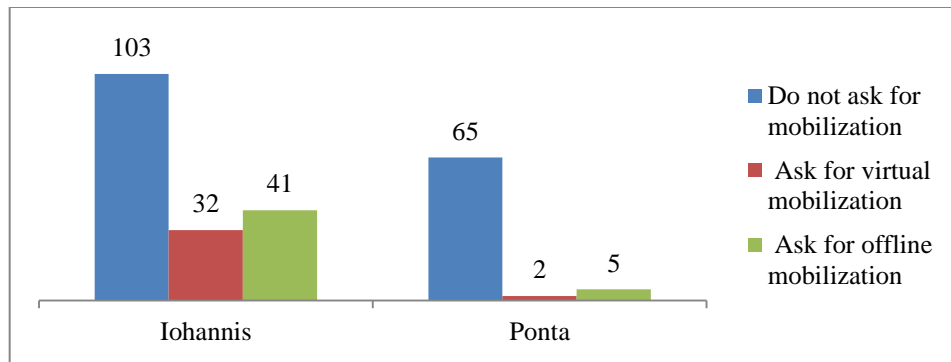


Figure 1. User mobilization in the 2014 presidential campaign

The different strategy adopted by the two candidates can also be seen in this chart above (see Figure no.1), 34% of Iohannis’ messages asking for virtual or/and offline support, while in Ponta’s case the percentage is only 7%. For Iohannis, the virtual mobilization includes asking users to share his messages, to give feedback on certain topics or to add to their profile/cover picture elements showing their support to the candidate. For Ponta these messages are incentives for users to share his messages. For both Iohannis and Ponta, the messages asking for offline mobilization invited users to vote or to take part to meetings with the candidate.

Table 1. Online participation in the 2014 presidential campaign

Candidate	Total
Iohannis	152
empower/engage	35
enable	117
Ponta	70
empower/engage	2
enable	68
Grand Total	222

In the case of online participation, the findings revealed a clear difference between the two candidates; Iohannis tries to involve the users in his online campaign, by giving them responsibilities (eg. “Share/like this messages if you agree”) or asking for feedback, 23% of the messages triggering this type of participation (empower/engage). Even if the number of this type of messages is not that high when compared to the other messages, the percentage is significantly higher than Ponta’s, who, on the other hand, has only 3% of the messages in the category of empower/engage.

4.1.1. Online user reactions (engagement)

Taking a closer looked at Iohannis’ online campaign, we discover a pattern of communication used in both Obama’s presidential campaigns: he actively sought user interactions by using intensive personalisation of the speech in an attempt to close the gap between the candidate and his supporters. As a result of his strategy and use of social network tools, candidate Iohannis became rapidly very popular on Facebook, his campaign leading to millions of reactions – almost 3000 000 likes, over 500 000 shares and 100 000 comments (Iohannis official Facebook page, 2018). His most appreciated posts were focused on his online community, including a call to action. The candidate Klaus Iohannis run a very active and interactive campaign, published approximately 170 messages, with an average of 5 messages per day. His messages focused on getting closer to the users in order to gain their support. When it comes to user engagement, our data confirms the hypothesis: mobilizing messages lead to higher engagement among users, as there is significant differentiation between the posts asking for

mobilization and the non mobilizing ones. The Oneway Anova we run also indicated a significant differentiation between the analysed variables, a with 0.05 sig. value.

4.2.Parliamentary elections

4.2.1. Mobilization and online participation

From the official start of the campaign until Election day, the three most popular parties and their leaders have posted more than 320 messages on Facebook. The most active party is USR, with over 175 messages posted on its pages, followed by PSD and PNL. PSD distinguishes from other parties by two main characteristics. First, the public can post directly on its leader’s page. Secondly, more than half of the messages on PSD’s page are posts which do not include any media or links, just text. When it comes to the ten most popular posts, they belong to PNL and USR. The most popular post (32186 likes, 3426 shares and 4226 comments) belongs to the PNL, and it endorses Dacian Ciolos as prime minister.

In the case of PNL and its leader, Dacian Ciolos, the communication strategy focuses on two directions: asserting support for Dacian Ciolos as prime minister and criticizing the Social Democratic Party (PSD). In contrast, PSD and its leader Liviu Dragnea focus their efforts mainly on presenting the government program, with more than 50% of the messages dedicated to the electoral measures. What is more, Liviu Dragnea was the only leader during the elections who allowed users to post messages on his wall, while all the other leaders disabled this option on their online pages.

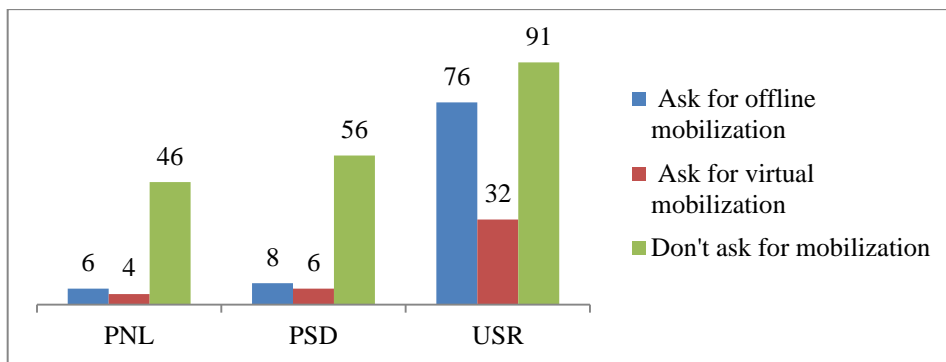


Figure 2. User mobilization in the 2016 parliamentary campaign

During the parliamentary elections, the voters' attention is not directed to a candidate, but to a group of candidates as party representatives. As a result, the promotion strategy is different, focusing on increasing the reputation of the candidates. The low interest in parties and parliamentary elections means that in this case communication in the online environment is mainly a way of disseminating information in order to get acquainted with the candidates and less a tool for mobilizing voters. The only party that used in a higher percentage mobilizing messages was USR (47%), as it was a new party trying to get more supporters. In contrast, PSD and PNL have only 12% of mobilizing messages.

Table 2. Online participation in the 2016 parliamentary campaign

Party	Total
PNL	52
empower/engage	4
enable	48
PSD	64
empower/engage	7
enable	57
USR	166
empower/engage	32

enable	134
Grand Total	282

The table above indicates that the use of Facebook made by the candidates was unequal: they put all their efforts into spreading information but most missed the opportunity offered by this network to engage with the users and to trigger online participation. PNL has the lowest percentage when it comes to empowering or engaging with the users, with only 8%, followed by PSD (11%) and USR (19%). At the same time, the candidates focused mainly on increasing their notoriety, giving few details about their government proposals: in fact, none of the candidates published the entire electoral program so that voters could consult it.

4.2.2. Online user reactions (engagement)

In the top of the most engaging parties PNL is the leader, with an average of nearly 2000 likes per published message and 800 - the average of shares. PNL is also the party that generates the largest amount of discussion among online users, generating an average of 230 comments on messages published during the November-December 2016 election campaign. It should be noted that in the case of PSD, user engagement on the page the party is low also due to the fact that some of the messages posted on the leader page belong to other users, and these statuses generate low involvement. Once these messages excluded, PSD has more likes on average than PNL, but fewer comments.

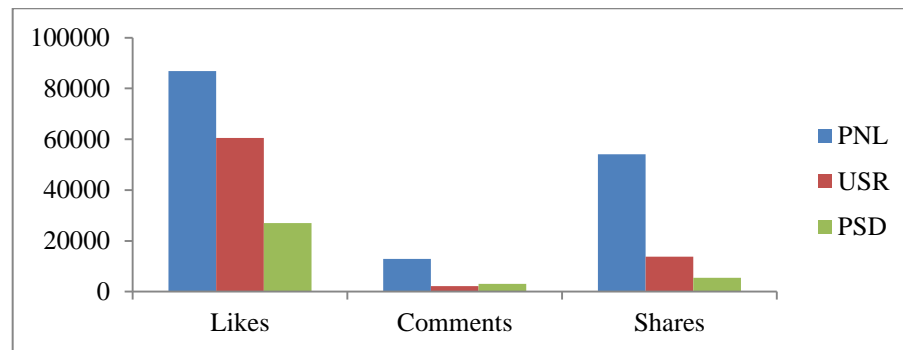


Figure 3. User reactions during the 2016 online campaign

If we turn our attention to the most popular posts, PNL is the leader of the rankings, followed by USR. The most popular post - 32,186 likes, 3,425 shares and 4,256 comments - belongs to PNL as well and it endorses Dacian Ciolos as prime minister. For PSD, the messages that generate the most reactions from users feature party's leader, Liviu Dragnea, the case being the same for USR, its messages focusing on Nicusor Dan, the party's leader.

In contrast to the presidential elections, the statistics indicate no significant differentiation between the posts containing mobilizing content and the non mobilizing ones, therefore in this case, our hypothesis could not be confirmed. Due to the fact that during the parliamentary campaign the strategy focuses on presenting the candidates, the use of mobilizing content is rather rare and user interaction rather low. The data was supported by the Oneway Anova as well.

5. Conclusions, limitations and future research

The transformation of online social networks in one of the most relevant media of mass communication has not gone unnoticed by political specialists, who seized the opportunity to approach voters. Online social networks can be a very appropriate channel to interact with voters, and especially

to attract a segment of the electorate that does not respond to traditional media of mass communication. However, the simple presence on social networks does not guarantee the success. Strategists still need to consider an integrated communication campaign that can make use of social networks' key features, as interactivity, engagement and dialogue.

All around the world, social networks changed the political game and Romania is no exception. Both in 2014 and 2016 elections, Facebook influenced electoral behaviour, empowering a category of people who are not receptive to traditional mass-media. The 2014 presidential election triggered an alarm, demonstrating the importance of social networking in recent years. The 2016 parliamentary elections continued the integration of social networks in the communication strategy, but they were only complementary means of disseminating the information and presenting the candidates, not focusing on truly interacting with the online voters.

The content analysis indicated that during the 2014 presidential elections, Iohannis focused on getting closer to the users in order to gain their support and tried to use mobilizing content to trigger user engagement and participation, which in the end differentiated him from his opponent. The statistical data confirmed our hypothesis, the mobilizing messages leading to higher user engagement. The 2016 parliamentary elections continued to emphasize the importance of social networks in campaigns, as it gave authority to a recently created party – USR, but revealed that the political parties did not take advantage of the social networks' key features, by failing to engage the users or to mobilize them. The party which more tried to integrate mobilizing content in its campaign was USR, all the other political parties limiting to using one way communication. In the case of the parliamentary elections, the statistical data did not confirm our hypothesis, indicating no significant differentiation between the posts containing mobilizing content and the non mobilizing ones and the users' reactions.

To our knowledge, this study is the first one that takes a closer look at the implications of mobilization and participation throughout online social networks in an emerging democracy like Romania. By adapting the categories previously used in well-established democracies like United States of America or Spain, we were able to find out more information about the way the Romanian politicians communicate online. Even more, the study integrates both 2014 presidential and 2016 parliamentary elections, a comparison that was not carried out before. Even so, this sample is still a partial snapshot in the context of a massive campaign that started months before Election Day. Therefore, future research could take into consideration extending the content analysis to all the posts published on Facebook before Election day. Furthermore, an analysis of the users' comments would reveal more about their attitude towards the political actors, as the number of online reactions is not automatically a reflection of users' support. Nonetheless, the study generates valuable insight into the Romanian online campaigning that can be used in future research and sets up the parameters for further complex investigation.

6. Bibliography

- [1] Agnes, Tamas (2013). *Comunicarea politică în rețelele de socializare*, Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai, Cluj-Napoca.
- [2] Aparaschivei, P. A. (2011). The Use of New Media in Electoral Campaigns: Analysis on the Use of Blogs, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in the 2009 Romanian Presidential Campaign, *Journal of Media Research*, pp. 39-60.
- [3] Ballesteros, C., Zamora, R., Sánchez, P., y Gil, A. (2017). La personalización de las campañas electorales online. *Las elecciones generales de 2015 (20D) a través de Facebook. XXIII Congreso de la Sociedad Española de Periodística*. Universidad Miguel Hernández (Elche).
- [4] Bor, S. E. (2013). Using Social Network Sites to Improve Communication Between Political Campaigns and Citizens in the 2012 Election. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 58(9), 1195–1213.

- [5] Boyd, D., y Ellison, N. (2008). Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship, en *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, n° 13, pp. 210-230. Disponible en <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x/epdf>
- [6] Bronstein, J. (2013). Like me! Analyzing the 2012 presidential candidates' Facebook pages. *Online Information Review*, 37(2), 173–192. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1108/OIR-01-2013-0002>
- [7] Casero Ripollés, A. (2009). El website com a instrument comunicatiu a les eleccions autonòmiques valencianes de 2007. *Anàlisi*, n° 38, pp. 35-54. Available at <http://www.raco.cat/index.php/analisi/article/viewFile/142471/194026>
- [8] Conroy, M., Feezell, J. T., Guerrero, M. (2012). Facebook and political engagement: A study of online political group membership and offline political engagement, *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28, pp. 1535–1546
- [9] Delany, C. (2009). *Learning from Obama: Lessons for online communicators in 2009 and beyond*. Retrieved March 12, 2017, from <http://www.epolitics.com/learning-from-obama/>
- [10] Gerodimos, R., y Justinussen, J. (2015). Obama's 2012 Facebook Campaign: Political Communication in the Age of the Like Button. *Journal of Information Technology y Politics*, 12(2), 113.132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2014.982266>
- [11] Giansante, G. (2015): *La comunicación política online*. Barcelona: Editorial UOC.
- [12] Gil de Zuniga, H., Puig-I-Abril, E., y Rojas, H. (2009). Weblogs, traditional sources online and political participation: An assessment of how the Internet is changing the political environment. *New Media y Society*, 11(4), 553–574.
- [13] Graham, T., Broersma, M., Hazelhoff, K., y van 't Haar, G. (2013). Between Broadcasting Political Messages and Interacting with Voters: The Use of Twitter during the 2010 UK General Election Campaign. *Information, Communication y Society*, 16(5), 692–716.
- [14] Gueorguieva, V. (2008). Voters, MySpace and YouTube: the impact of alternative communication channels on the 2006 election cycle and beyond. *Social Science Computer Review*, 26(3), 288–300.
- [15] Kaplan, A. M., Haenlein M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media, *Business Horizons*, 53, pp. 59–66
- [16] Katz, J., Barris, M., y Jain, A. (2013). *The social media president: Barack Obama and the politics of digital engagement*. Basingstoke,: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [17] LaMarre, H. L., Suzuki-Lambrecht, Y. (2013). Tweeting democracy? Examining Twitter as an online public relations strategy for congressional campaigns. *Public Relations Review*, 39, pp. 360-368.
- [18] Lilleker, D. G., y Jackson, N. A. (2011). *Political cam- 1385 paingning, elections and the Internet*. London: Routledge.
- [19] López García, G., Gamir Ríos, J. V., García Ull, F., Llorca Abad, G., Cano Orón, L., y González Esteban, J. L. (2015). El debate sobre Europa en Twitter. Discursos y estrategias de los candidatos de las Elecciones al Parlamento Europeo de 2014 en España. *Revista de Estudios Políticos (nueva época)*, n° 170, pp. 213-246.
- [20] Mascheroni, G., Mattoni, A. (2013). Electoral Campaigning 2.0. - The Case of Italian Regional Elections. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, pp. 165-178.
- [21] Medrán, A. (2007). *Internet i comunicació política a Espanya*. Memoria del postgrado. La práctica en la comunicación política. Institut de Ciències Polítiques i Socials.
- [22] Nicolás Ojeda, M. Á. (2012). Consideraciones sobre la comunicación publicitaria y redes sociales: usuarios, características, estrategias y planificación. Nicolás Ojeda, M. Á., y Grandío Pérez, M. (coords.): *Estrategias de comunicación en redes sociales. Usuarios, aplicaciones y contenidos*. Barcelona: Gedisa, pp. 13-30.
- [23] Ren, J., H., Meister, P. (2012). Drawing Lessons from Obama for the European Context. *The International Journal of Public Participation* 4, pp. 12-30.

- [24] Ríos, J. G. (2016). Blogs, Facebook and Twitter in Spanish General Election 2011. Quantitative Study of the Use of the Web 2.0 by Candidates of the PP and PSOE. *Revista de comunicación digital*, pp. 101 -120.
- [25] Stieglitz, S., Xuan, D. (2012). Social media and political communication: a social media analytics framework. *Social Network Analysis and Mining*, 3, pp. 1277-1291.
- [26] Sudulich, M. L., Wall, M., Jansen, E., y Cunningham, K. (2010). Me too for Web 2.0? Patterns of online campaigning among candidates in the 2010 UK general elections. *Elections, Public Opinion and Parties Annual Conference, University of Essex, Essex*.
- [27] Tasește, Tănase (2014), *Comunicarea politică prin social media și reacțiile publicului online*, Editura Universitară, București.
- [28] Towner, T.L., Dulio, D.A. (2011). The Web 2.0 Election: Does the Online Medium Matter? *Journal of Political Marketing*, 10 (1), pp. 165-188.
- [29] Túñez, M., y Sixto, J. (2011). Redes sociales, política y Compromiso 2.0: la comunicación de los diputados españoles en Facebook. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, nº66.
- [30] Turiera-Puigbó, T. (2009). Qué está cambiando internet en la manera de hacer y comunicar la acción política? *Quaderns del CAC*, nº 33, pp. 13-19.
- [31] Vallespín, F. (2011). Redes sociales y democracia: ¿un cambio cualitativo? *Telos. Cuadernos de Comunicación E Innovación*, (89).
- [32] Utz, S. (2009). The (Potential) Benefits of Campaigning via Social Network Sites. *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication*, 14, pp. 221-243.
- [33] Wattal, S., Schuff, D., Mandviwalla, M., Williams, C. (2010). Web 2.0 and Politics: The 2008 U.S. Presidential Election and an E-Politics research agenda. *MIS Quarterly*, 34 (4), pp. 394-411.
- [34] Westling, M. (2007). Expanding the public sphere: The impact of Facebook on political communication. *Society*, 28(5), 835–860.
- [35] Williams, C. B. and Gulati, Girsh J. (2009). *Explaining Facebook Support in the 2008 Congressional Election Cycle*. Working Papers. Paper 26. http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/pn_wp/26
- [36] Zeng D, Chen H, Lusch R, Li S. (2010). Social media analytics and intelligence. *IEEE Intell Syst* 25(6), pp. 13–16.
- Online sources
- [37] Avadanei, C. (2016). Topul țărilor cu cei mai mulți utilizatori pe Facebook, Retrieved from <https://socialweb.ro/topul-tarilor-cu-cei-mai-multi-utilizatori-pe-facebook/>. Accessed 10 April 2018.
- [38] Grigorescu, M. (2017). Top 15 Cele Mai Populare Site-uri si Aplicatii pentru Retele Sociale, Retrieved from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/top-15-cele-mai-populare-site-uri-si-aplicatii-pentru-grigorescu/> Accessed 10 April 2018.
- [39] Facebrands (2018). Retrieved from <http://www.facebrands.ro/demografice.html>. Accessed 10 April 2018.
- [40] Iohannis’ official Facebook page (2018). Retrieved from <http://www.facebook.com/klausiohannis.html>. Accessed 15 April 2018.
- [41] PMP’s official Facebook page (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/PartidulMiscareaPopulara.RO>. Accessed 15 April 2018.
- [42] PNL’s official Facebook page (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/pnl.ro>. Accessed 15 April 2018.
- [43] PSD’s official Facebook page (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/psdbiroupresa>. Accessed 15 April 2018.
- [44] USR’s official Facebook page (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/USRNational>.

Appendix 1

Figures

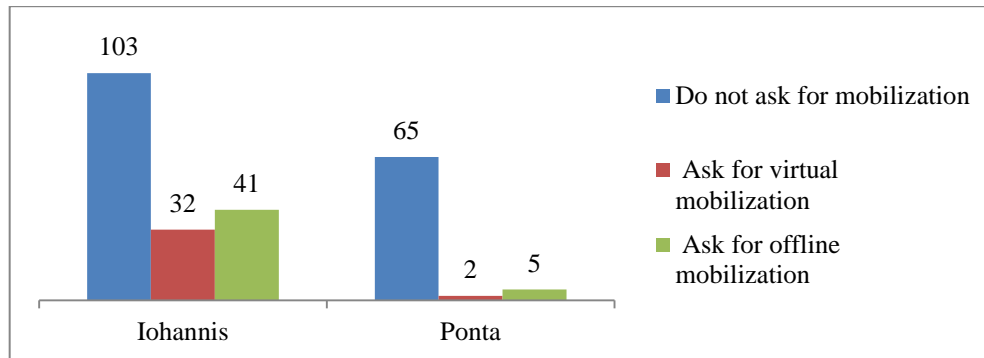


Figure 1. User mobilization in the 2014 presidential campaign

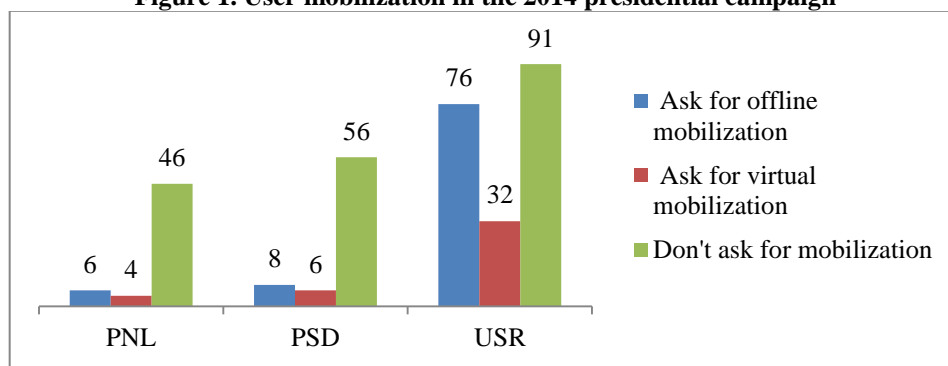


Figure 2: User mobilization in the 2016 parliamentary campaign

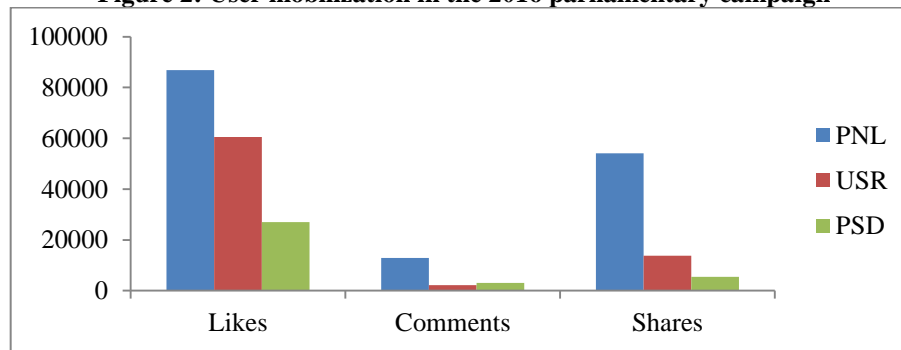


Figure no. 3 User reactions during the 2016 online campaign

Tables

Table 1. Online participation in the 2014 presidential campaign

Candidate	Total
Iohannis	152
empower/engage	35
enable	117
Ponta	70
empower/engage	2
enable	68
Grand Total	222

Table 2. Online participation in the 2016 parliamentary campaign

Party	Total
PNL	52
empower/engage	4
enable	48
PSD	64
empower/engage	7
enable	57
USR	166
empower/engage	32
enable	134
Grand Total	282