

# ADAPTING POLITICAL COMMUNICATION TO TECHNOLOGY. CASE STUDY: EVOLUTIONARY ASPECTS ON SOCIAL NETWORKS IN ROMANIA

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**Abstract:** *In recent years, studies on social networks have begun to become more and more numerous in the literature, with scientists showing a real interest in an influential analysis that they have on societies. Social networks are tools through which political candidates have the opportunity to distribute their political message during election campaigns, as well as outside them, to a growing audience. A very strong connection has been made between technology and communication, outside of which we, as individuals, can no longer exist, the virtual space managing to exploit communication in all its aspects. Online political communication, an easily accessible form of manifestation that attracts disinterested political groups, offers the possibility of avoiding information bottlenecks for citizens by changing content in real time, with low information costs, which means a real advantage for politicians. The importance of social networks in political communication is even greater as its role is the main channel of communication and occupies a special place in election campaign strategies. The present study aims to analyze the phenomenon of social networks in terms of the benefits it offers to politics, through an online political communication with content transmitted in real time, without time limit and with low costs.*

**Keywords:** social networks; political communication; online Facebook; social media; election campaign.

## 1. Introduction

Technology is the dominant element of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in all respects, and progress is required in all areas of activity. The communication is no exception to this rule, especially since the electoral campaigns of the last two years have been carried out in an atypical way, if we analyze the phenomenon from the perspective of the sanitary pandemic that the whole of humanity is facing.

As a vast and complex phenomenon, in a continuous change and adaptability, generating new contexts, but without being an exclusive concept

of today, political communication imposes new opinions, aspirations and beliefs in order to change electoral attitudes and behaviors (Bărbieru, 2021: 97). Trends in the use of artificial intelligence and algorithmic data are nowadays a great opportunity, but also a real challenge in adapting to the new realities of these times (Larrondo-Ureta, Meso-Ayerdi, 2022: 43).

There has been a very strong connection between technology and communication (Tareen, Adnan, 2021: 130), outside of which we, as individuals, can no longer exist, the virtual space with its social networks managing to exploit communication in all its aspects. With the advent of new technologies, our lives have changed radically, and today's world is no longer the same as the one in which many of us were born (Esser, 2019: 1125). We have become increasingly concerned with finding information on the Internet, interacting on social networks, or documenting ourselves through virtual libraries. Traditional media (newspapers, radio stations, television stations and news agencies) have been key tools in influencing society in the age of mass communication, exerting their influence in building the agenda and public debate, in shaping public opinion or even in taking of political decisions. Even with great influence, the digital environment, first with the Internet, then with social media, has changed the conditions and dynamics through which the media system exerts influence on society (Casero-Ripolles, 2018).

## **2. Objectives and methodology of the study**

The study demonstrates the evolution and adoption of social networks in online communication in the Romanian political environment of the first manifestations of the phenomenon so far. As an irreversible process, the transformation of social networks into the most relevant tools of mass communication could not go unnoticed by political strategies. In order to attract as many votes as possible, the online public was considered an essential factor in communicating political information and messages. However, a simple online presence cannot guarantee success, so political communication strategies have been developed, adapted to social networks and able to attract as many supporters and voters as possible.

Understanding the importance of social networks in political communication in Romania, in election campaigns and abroad, as the main objective of our study, is demonstrated with the help of qualitative and quantitative comparative analysis. It compares the most important electoral moment in which social networks acted as a decisive factor and generated upheavals at the time of voting, through qualitative analysis, and follows the evolution of political communication through the social network Facebook, as the main network in the dissemination of the political message, by quantitative analysis.

### 3. Analytical and theoretical framework

In recent years, studies on social networks have begun to be more and more numerous in the literature, with scientists showing a real interest in studying the influence they have on society (Semetko, Tworzecki, 2017).

Social networks have been defined as a group of Internet-based applications that create both the making of and exchange of content generated by various users (Kaplan, Haenlein, 2000: 60; Trejos-Gil, 2021: 82), with two-way communication targeting and an increased participation, or as digital channels of communication between people or between people and information with several personalized, fast and convenient ways (Katz, Barris, Jain, 2013: 12). Basically, the emergence of social networks has moved from traditional media, in which the message was transmitted through a certain channel to the receiver, with limited and one-way feedback (the message of a politician is transmitted to the public through written media, audio and video), to an interactive model with an active audience. In the online environment, political messages must be powerful (Vlăduțescu, 2020: 316) and constructed in such a way as to attract voters effectively, and in order to achieve their ultimate goal of creating an emotional connection with the voter or a potential voter, they must meet a number of characteristics: be clear, credible, concise, relevant and contrasting, address the target audience and, last but not least, repeat themselves constantly. These features do not only belong to the online environment, but there is no doubt that in the online environment they can be applied much better than in any other environment.

Through the development of social networks, communication experienced the fastest development compared to everything it had known before (Vlăduțescu, Ciupercă, 2013). In 2011, in a study published in the “Sfera Politicii”, Ionela Carmen Boșoteanu, making an analogy between communication and the Internet, said that:

“It has rarely been a medium with such a wide and effective potential to significantly change the form of communication as the Internet. With the characteristics of cyberspace, Web and information highway, the Internet connected the world through a common denominator, *virtual space*, which gave it what McLuhan called the content of a *global village*” (Boșoteanu, 2011: 47).

Wikipedia defines social media as a group of devices based on a device, built to facilitate communication between Internet users and for the exchange of content – text, photo, audio-video – between members of trusted social groups. Today, social media plays an extremely important role in our lives, with recent studies concluding that an increasing number of people use the internet for both social and informational reasons, and the frequency of

use is also increasing (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, Nielsen, 2017: 12-17).

Research has shown that through social media, users have much greater control over information, can decide on its content and express their opinions in a timely manner, the transmission of information is more efficient and, perhaps most importantly, the public involves also in the area of politics (Gainous, Wagner, 2014: 6).

The great success of social networks is also due to the low financial costs. In recent years, due to these low requirements and the emergence of applications on mobile phones, the number of social network users has increased significantly. By 2020, there were over 3.6 billion users (with a global penetration rate of 54%), and their number will increase to 4.41 billion by 2025, according to Social Media & User-Generated Content (Statista, 2021). Since direct interaction is no longer necessary, the traditional way of communicating people has been radically changed by the advent of social networks. The distances, no matter how great, do not hinder any communication, the communication, including the political one, being realized permanently, if we analyze the phenomenon from the perspective of time. Among the social networks, the most popular in October 2021 are Facebook, with 2,895 million users, YouTube with 2,291 million users, WhatsApp with 2,000 million, Instagram with 1,393 million, Facebook Messenger with 1,300 million users, Weixin / WeChat with 1,251 million, TikTok with 1,000 million users. Among those with fewer users, Twitter has started to gain a lot of popularity (463 million users in October 2021) (Statista, 2021), which in the near future could mean a migration of communication, including of political communication to this channel. So far, it has not had a major impact on political communication (Rotesi, 2019: 26).

The current form of online communication through tablets and smartphones allows an impressive number of users to take an active part in the political debate, with social media becoming the main channel for transmitting the political message (Alizadeh, Saeidabadi, Khajeheian, 2021: 167). Politicians have understood that the inclusion of new technologies in the campaign strategy is essential in increasing the chances in front of the electorate (Magin, Podschuweit, Haßler, Russmann, 2017: 1707). Basically, they realized that the social media phenomenon and the way it works offer the political environment advantages difficult to imagine a few decades ago.

Social networks transmit information faster than ever and allow communication from any electronic device and at any time, the time restriction being removed. Regarding the political communication made through social networks, we note that there is a direct interaction between politicians and voters (Hedman, Sivnert, Kollanyi, Narayanan, Neudert, Howard, 2018: 1). For presidential candidates, for example, social media is

the ideal place to promote themselves and interact directly with citizens (Ceccobelli, 2019: 12), without the filter of traditional media. Unlike traditional media, social networks have the ability to introduce the stories of candidates in the general consciousness. At the same time, they have a direct effect on the news, at the moment the professional journalistic organizations are inspired by these channels (Kelm, Dohle, Bernhard, 2019: 3), all the more so as they also have the capacity to influence the discourse of the citizens themselves.

In a study published in 2016 by Rune Karlesen and Bernard Enjolras on candidates in Norway, the authors conclude that almost everyone believes that social networks are important for political campaigns, for creating political content, for reaching as many voters as possible and to mobilize party supporters:

“Social media is a popular campaign channel for parliamentary candidates in Norway. In 2013, more than 80 percent of the surveyed candidates used social media in their campaigns. In addition, the significance of Facebook has increased considerably. Facebook is considered far more important in 2013 than social media were in 2009. This also reflects that more candidates used social media in 2013 than in 2009. Candidates who used social media in 2009 considered it important then as well” (Karlesen, Enjolras, 2016: 345).

Also, 40% of respondents viewed social media as important in showing their personal side, thus becoming more humane in front of the electorate, such an exposure being quite difficult to achieve through traditional methods.

Social networks not only have the ability to publicize communication in various ways, but also to redistribute power by transforming the government-citizen relationship, with citizens having more opportunities to participate in politics (Yan, 2021: 108). At the same time, they have the ability to influence relations in political parties, allowing candidates from the territory to reach the voters in a more independent form from the central party (Karlesen, Enjolras, 2016: 339), offering them new opportunities for promotion and attracting voters. On the other hand, social media has expanded the space or spaces in which political actors can launch their political message effectively for a very wide audience, but has also developed the typology of actors to interact and negotiate in political communication (Casero-Ripollés, 2018). The communicative landscape is much more competitive than before the Internet and is dominated by new forms of participation in the democratic process. In a hybrid system of political communication, it is more than obvious at this time that only candidates who

gain influence on social media are able to create a synergy between traditional media channels and new channels (Karlesen, Enjolras, 2016: 338).

Social networks are also important for parties and candidates who do not have enough funds to support election campaigns in the classic form. Basically, the appearance of this form of online demonstration was a real chance to promote politics for them, to attract the electorate and to reduce the gaps with the big parties or well-known candidates. Online political communication is an easily accessible form of manifestation, which attracts disinterested political groups, offers the possibility to avoid information bottlenecks for citizens by changing the content in real time, with low information costs. Paid channels or online advertising are used to support the main channels, but also as stand-alone tools.

Google's browser makes links to political sites through a multitude of links at the same time that social media ads come to support the materials distributed on the platforms – posts, pages or websites. Targeting criteria are used, and materials are targeted to the right people or target groups. Messages are sent through Sidebar ads, recruits are made, candidates' Facebook pages are promoted, followers are increased, they are redirected to external pages, while Timeline ads apply to organic content and are an important component in the strategy of an online election campaigns. YouTube ads cover those who use this channel as a target audience, as is the case with Twitter, a channel used mainly by young people. Another use of social media networks is that they are not only used as tools to convey a political message. They also allow you to analyze voters' feedback in real time, but also to measure visitors' feedback by using measurement parameters – number of views, traffic at different times, most visited pages, visitors' locations (e.g. in analyzing the urban environment versus the rural environment), the actions on the pages, the interactions, the number of people to whom the posts were displayed, but also the activity from the pages of the candidates or opposition parties (Bărbieru, 2021: 102).

#### **4. Pioneering of online political communication**

Social networks are the tools through which political candidates have the opportunity to distribute their political message during election campaigns, as well as outside them, to a growing public. They represent platforms for two-way communication, for direct interaction with their supporters, for disseminating information, raising funds and mobilizing voters.

The president who made the most of social networks was Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential elections. Also known as the First Internet President of the United States, he used Facebook and Twitter to communicate his political messages and goals. Erik Qualman believes that these have

played a major role in mobilizing Americans to vote because the highest number of voters in the last hundred years has been recorded (Momoc, 2021: 109-110). Basically, the 2008 campaign provided the perfect opportunity to demonstrate the usefulness of social networks in politics, as communication tools, without replacing the political message or strategy, but as an important part of the campaign strategy.

Although the Internet was used as a tool for political communication in the US presidential campaign in 2000, when Bush and Al Gore staff's created online content through simple websites for the online consumer population at the time, the 2008 presidential campaign is important because of the major changes brought about by social media tools, the emergence of Web 2.0 and the launch of Facebook (2004, open to the public in 2006), YouTube (2005) and Twitter (2006). Starting with this campaign, social networks are playing an increasingly important, extensive and meaningful role (Kelm, 2020: 8), with communication becoming interactive, two-way and giving everyone the opportunity to be both active participants and content creators (Hwang, 2016: 8). Some online tools had been used before, for example in 1996, when Bob Dole encouraged his voters to visit his site. It is considered that this is the moment when the use of the Internet in political communication came to the attention of specialists in the academic field, but also to the attention of the media. Basically, Dole's announcement was a symbol of the beginning of the expansion of the Internet in the electoral process, but also in politics in general. It has been estimated that 29% of American citizens have used this tool to gather the political information they need (Gibson, Ward, 2000: 301), and since then we can consider that traditional tools of campaigning and political communication have been added the online component, obviously in a form of pioneering, operational through the candidates' campaign sites (Bărbieru, 2015: 42).

To win the election, Barack Obama used all the tools that could lead him to victory, so he fully embraced the huge potential that social media had at his disposal, using technology and social media as an integral part of his campaign strategy. Unlike his predecessors, Obama not only used the Internet to disseminate campaign and candidate information, but developed a concept hitherto unknown to politicians, namely his involvement and voters' involvement in the active game of his election as president. Basically, he developed a segment of online supporters, a segment that in the opinion of many was decisive for his arrival at the White House:

“From the beginning, Obama understood the importance and potential of social media as a tool for political communication and campaigning. He hired Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes to revolutionize his new media campaign and provide expertise to the various social networking

platforms that resonated with the millennial generation that has always been connected to technology. His campaign was also the first to include a New Media Department that *was responsible for everything beyond the Internet besides technical areas*, according to Obama's chief digital strategist, Joe Rospars. Obama's smart and pioneering use of Web 2.0 technology has allowed him to reap the benefits of social media” (Hwang, 2016: 10).

In order to be able to communicate his political message and to attract different age groups or people with different socio-professional interests, Obama and his team understood that a variety of social platforms are required. Permanent contact with voters was also important, and the potential offered by social media in this regard had not been previously exploited by anyone. Thus, he regularly shared family photos, from his campaign rallies or highlighted through his Facebook page his favorite sports activities. All this overshadowed his opponent, who seemed quite boring. All the online actions taken by Obama's team counted impressive numbers for that moment. By election day, YouTube videos mentioning Obama totaled 1.9 billion views compared to 1.1 of his opponent, and if the exposure had been made through the media, with TV airtime, the costs would have amounted to \$ 47 million for Obama and \$ 1.5 million for McCain, according to analysis by the TechPresident blog (14).

Practically, since 2008, social media has become an important tool of political communication and election campaigns. Just as television helped Kennedy in the 1960<sup>s</sup>, the Internet is now helping Obama, who is considered the politician who paved the way for politics in the online world. He relied on *Facebook* pages, *YouTube* channels and personal websites, managing to combine in his campaign strategy two directions – the old (traditional) and the new (social media) (Bărbieru, 2015: 44-46). The innovative way proved to be the winning formula in its political battle, and social media claimed a place that grew and developed in each subsequent campaign, regardless of the country in which it manifests itself as an integral part of the political game. At the same time, it is the year in which the mentalities of political communication, campaign techniques, but also politicians have changed. Politicians' attitudes towards voters have also changed, although not immediately. Social media has become a very serious strategic point for election campaigns in the next period, especially since a simple online discussion could become a discussion watched by the whole planet (Bărbieru, 2020: 133). The presence of politicians on social networks has become a necessity for both elected officials and voters, with new media contributing to a better knowledge of the candidate by the electorate.



## **5. Manifestation of political communication on social networks in the Romanian political space**

### **5.1 Statistical data**

In Romania, there has been an increasing display in the online environment, especially in the last period, when the health crisis accelerated this process. In May 2021, according to Ookla, a company specializing in internet speed testing, Romania ranked 4th in the world (and first in Europe), after Singapore, Thailand and Hong Kong, in speed for fixed internet and 34th for mobile internet, and the report published by the National Authority for Administration and Regulation in Communications indicated 5.5 million fixed connections and 19.5 million mobile internet connections (practically more than the country's population) (Ujica, 2021).

In December 2021, the National Institute of Statistics made public the latest data on the internet connection in Romania. Approximately 8 out of 10 households (80.8%) had access to the Internet at home, the higher percentage being registered in urban areas (86.9% compared to 73.1% in rural areas). Making a comparative analysis, we notice a slight increase compared to 2020 when 78.2% of all households had access to the Internet (84.8% urban, 69.7% rural), the rate being increased by 2.5% in the same year compared to 2019 (82.5% urban, 66.8% rural). By age groups, the growth of Romanian internet consumers has been constant. For the year 2021, the percentage of internet users between 16 and 34 years old was 98.4% compared to 96.6% in 2020, and in the category 55-74 years old, 70.5% compared to 65.4% in 2020. The number of those who used the Internet less than 3 months was only 1.5% for 16-35 years and 13.5% for 55-74 years (INS, 2020: 1; INS, 2021: 1-2).

The adoption of the online environment in Romania was increasing in 2021. The New Media Adoption research, conducted by the media agency Spark Foundry, a member of Publicis Groupe Romania, between September 8-15, 2021, shows that Romanians used the online environment to a greater extent compared to previous years. Facebook continued to be the most accessed social network (93% of respondents) by all age groups, with a higher share for people over 55 years old (98%) (G4Media.ro 2021).

### **5.2 The shyness of the beginning on social networks in political communication**

Although access to the Internet was limited, online activity had been felt since the end of the last millennium by the growing demand in the field of online commerce and entertainment. However, in a short time social media has become the most exploited means of mass communication with a special impact on societies, implicitly also on Romanian politics. An initial manifestation of local political communication in the virtual space took place

through blogs, the aim being to mobilize supporters and voters, but also to provide the necessary space for topics to debate for voters.

Among the Romanian politicians, the first to create a personal blog was Ioan Mircea Pașcu in 2006 (Pătruț, 2011: 60), being the first to understand that he can increase his notoriety through this tool. Subsequently, there is a development of the blogosphere in Romanian politics, politicians understanding the important role that blogs played in political communication. It took quite a short time from the appearance of the first blog of a Romanian politician to the appearance of several hundred blogs with a political theme. Thus, in July 2009 there were already 350 blogs, of which 132 were from PSD, 113 from PC, 90 from PDL and 87 from PNL (60).

In the 2008 parliamentary elections, the blog was used in political communication and in the transmission of the electoral message online by the most active of Romanian politicians. They are timid uses, however, even if this tool offered the possibility for any politician or political party to use it, due to the small investment, and to compete democratically in the virtual environment. At the same time, the social network Facebook begins to be used in political communication in Romania. The first uses were made in the 2008 parliamentary campaign and 2009 presidential campaign to promote politicians and attract voters.

We note the involvement of social networks in the presidential election campaign in 2009 in a somewhat more dynamic way. From this moment, politicians begin to transmit to the electorate and supporters certain electoral information, such as the places where they could be seen, the events they participated in or the electoral messages they supported (Boșoteanu, 2011: 50). Basically, it is the campaign in which the local competitors used Facebook, simultaneously with the campaign sites and blogs, but also with the video sharing sites. The large increase in internet users, especially in 2007, when in August there were just over 5 million users, and in November there were already 7 million, led Romanian politicians to consider that this electoral pool could not be bypassed (Momoc, 2011: 39). However, the interaction between politician and voter as we know it today was not widely used, the interventions in the comments posted were without much involvement. Internet users were

“too little encouraged to develop a frequent, coherent and direct dialogue, the interactivity not being always symmetrical and prompt. At the same time, the control of the messages worked, and the candidates lacked consistency and speed of response. On the other hand, the Romanian parties and their presidential candidates focused on providing online information about their history, biography, organization and positions on current political issues, through

newsletters, campaign documents, press releases and party news, while general references, even to the Romanian political system or an electoral procedure, were missing. The only one who posted the electoral procedure on the campaign site was Kelemen Hunor” (Boşoteanu, 2011: 54).

New technologies were used in the 2009 campaign, but in an empirical way compared to what we know from the current campaigns. The electoral debate was not a sustained one, the candidates did not debate political ideas or projects and did not respond to the comments of the citizens. The online environment was used to send messages of self-promotion, attacks on political opponents, to mobilize voters and to avoid awkward debates (Pătruț, 2015: 130).

If the year 2011 meant 85 Romanian parliamentarians with an account in the social network Facebook, the most popular of them being Crin Antonescu (16,210 fans), Elena Udrea (9,000 fans) and Nicolae Robu (5,000 friends), starting with 2012 it was recorded a dynamic in the use of social networks for the Romanian political space, the referendum for the dismissal of the president turning into a real online effervescence with supporters and opponents, with praises and attacks, distributed photos and comments or distribution of political information, especially towards the end of the campaign (Pătruț, 2014: 249).

Social networks are beginning to stand out as vectors of political communication for the Romanian political scene in 2012, the start of the offline and online campaign, both for the dismissal of the president and for the parliamentary elections at the end of the year, being taken at the same time this year. Not only the campaign teams adopted this new trend of political communication, but also the voters, especially since some of them belonged to the new generation – the net generation. Thus, the idea of an online political relationship was beginning to take shape, with a greater inclination towards cooperation and the creation of political content, especially in the Facebook network, the most popular at that time for Romania.

Candidates have increased their visibility through social networks, their presence in the virtual environment and the transmission of the political message through these tools following the trends of increasing the use of networks as a means of mass communication. However, social networks were not yet used to their full potential in political communication, but rather aimed at a political PR tool through which candidates and political parties promoted themselves through election texts, photos from campaign events, rallies or meetings with voters.

### **5.3 Romania and the key moment in the use of social networks in the political space**

Like America, Romania had a key and novel moment in 2014, when social media played a key role in the presidential election. At that time, social media was the instrument determined in the reversal of the situation between the two rounds of elections, the effect produced was unexpected and to be taken into account for all future elections. The mobilization of the diaspora on social networks was decisive in the appointment of the president. At the same time, the main way in which the future president and his campaign staff attracted voters was the online campaign, with a well-thought-out social media strategy. It was the moment when the social networks in Romania managed to go far beyond the traditional channels – TV, radio and print media. The convergence of Facebook, television and mobile telephony meant a huge mobilization in favor of mass voting, and the election result led the political class to understand the major importance of social media in disseminating the political message and using these tools in election campaigns. Basically, it was the best lesson that the entire political class in Romania received.

The presidential elections in Romania in 2014 were the result of social networks. Facebook, the social platform preferred by Romanians and available to both candidates equally, where the ideological struggles took place and where the ideas of the governing program were exposed, attracted the young electorate (Covaci, 2015: 90).

With less political experience at the national level than his opponent, with certain communication difficulties in political discourse, as well as with a permanently displayed rigidity and sobriety that usually do not catch much in the young electorate, Iohannis won the presidential election with an election campaign conducted mainly online, on social media, and only secondarily using traditional campaign techniques. He was the first politician in Europe to exceed the 1,000,000 fan mark on his Facebook page, surpassing Merkel, Hollande or Sarkozy. His growth was rapid, considering that in the first round he had about 500,000 fans, on election day about 850,000 (ahead of its opponent, Victor Ponta by just over 825,000 fans), and immediately after the election, on November 28, he reached 1.2 million fans. Using social media tools with great skill he has become very popular on Facebook with millions of reactions (likes, shares, comments). Thus, he totaled approximately 3 million likes, over 500,000 redistributions and 100,000 comments, well above his opponent (Sasu, Androniciuc, 2017: 462).

His online campaign had a very well thought out social media strategy, and the target group of voters was that of young people aged 18-35 in urban areas, a group quite difficult to vote for through traditional methods. Thus, a virtual campaign was created for this age segment, having the

certainty that only in this way they can be mobilized for the vote, many of them being without political concerns and sympathies (Bărbieru, 2015: 47).

According to some analysts, the diaspora, through social networks, with images transmitted in real time from the polling stations, tipped the balance decisively towards the future president. Basically, it was the moment when electronic solidarity proved its speed and the power to amplify certain feelings, people synchronizing themselves in experiencing similar emotions (Covaci, 2015: 91). The “major importance of social media in increasing the public participation of the online public and the dissemination of the political message through users of social networks” that could be used as main vectors of communication during election campaigns became evident (Bărbieru, 2015: 47).

In future election campaigns, and not only during the campaigns, political competitors, candidates and parties have paid special attention to social media in political communication, turning them into the main channels of electoral communication, with different strategies created around them, so that the political message can reach as many voters as possible, young and old alike.

#### **5.4 Social networks are becoming commonplace for political actors and the public**

In the 2016 local elections, the candidates moved much more online, but did not give up the traditional forms of conveying the political message. It is noteworthy that television has lost its primacy in political communication. This time being on social networks has become a necessity for all candidates, and online has become an important part of the political communication strategy, the Internet becoming indispensable for both the Romanian political class and voters.

Facebook has become the most valuable means of interaction with voters for all political actors in Romania. The party that made the most use of this social network to spread its mobilizing messages was USB (Save Romania Union). A few years after the 2016 local and parliamentary elections, we can say, without any reservation, that only through the traditional techniques of political communication this party would not have managed the performance of becoming the 3rd largest party in such a short time (it was established on July 1, 2015 as USB – Save Bucharest Union, and on August 21, 2016, together with two other small formations, it became USB – Save Romania Union). At the same time, for this political party the importance of the social network Facebook is all the greater as its financial and human resources were incomparably smaller compared to the big parties of the moment, PSD and PNL.

The most popular political party on Facebook was PNL with about 250,000 fans, followed by PSD with 67,000 and USR with 62,000. Analyzing the response of users in the parliamentary campaign, with an average of about 2,000 likes per message and a total of over 85,000 likes, PNL was the leader. At the same time, it was the party that generated the largest volume of discussions, with an average of 230 comments among online users and used the most campaign videos (Facebook's new online political communication tool). PNL also generated the most popular post, with 32,186 likes, 3,425 shares and 4,256 comments (Sasu, Androniciuc, 2017: 463-464).

Making a comparative analysis between the presidential campaign of 2014 and the parliamentary one of 2016, we notice that the online voters had a lower interest, but the reason is political because, in the evolution of the post-December elections in Romania, the presidential ones received more and more attention from the part of the voters. On the other hand, in 2016 the social media campaign aimed more at disseminating political information / messages and getting acquainted with candidates and less at mobilizing voters.

For 2019, we will analyze the European Parliamentary elections, especially since they represent the elections that generate the least interest for Romanian voters. At the level of January 2019, there were 9.8 million Facebook users in Romania, according to ZeList. The total number of pages was 83,097, of which 43,417 were active pages. The total number of posts in the analyzed interval was 1.65 million, and the comments on the public pages amounted to 4.38 million (Agerpres 2019).

From the analysis of political communication during the election campaign through social networks for the three main parties (PSD, PNL, USR) we see that Facebook has retained the privilege of the main social network through which the political message has spread in the Romanian political space. PNL also kept its upward trend, its page having the most fans – 293,677, which generated the most reactions (comments and redistributions – 72.9% of the total reactions). USR rises to second place with 126,466 fans, and PSD reaches 86,541 fans (Tasente, 2019: 54). The party that managed to capture the largest number of fans on its page is USR, from about 62,000 to over 126,000. The dissemination was also made to social groups whose members included users who were not necessarily fans of a political party, thus increasing the credibility of political information. The online communication was led by the National Liberal Party on the page of which 105,000 redistributions were made, followed by USR with 48,000 redistributions and the Social Democratic Party with 13,000 shares (55). To all this are added the reactions on the pages of politicians (candidates or not), which, depending on the notoriety of the politician, can considerably exceed the reactions on the page of the party.

As an online campaign strategy, PNL focused its communication on the statements of the candidates and the president of Romania, PSD on videos with electoral events, statements by President Dragnea and the achievements of the government, and USR on attacks against PSD. PNL and USR mobilized their online electorate very well, but also the segments of the public not interested in voting. The biggest gain belongs to the USR, which this time managed, through social networks, to mobilize social media users who had previously been absent from voting. Those who were disinterested were also mobilized through social networks, but they wanted to give a negative vote to PSD.

In conclusion, in the 2019 European elections, Facebook played a decisive role in designating the winners. As in 2014, when those who understood the need to mobilize social network users won, in 2019 those who understood how to better mobilize their online audience won.

In 2020, the Covid 19 pandemic forced political parties to show up online more than ever, but the practices were nothing new to anyone – neither political actors nor voters. On the social network Facebook, still preferred by Romanians, the election campaign was structured and planned in advance, specific posts were made according to a predetermined schedule, and increased visibility was cascaded by amplifying a post with a specific content through other subsequent posts with similar content. Videos uploaded directly to the platform and embedded in posts were used for greater exposure. The electorate has never known better information during the election campaigns than now, but we consider that it was absolutely normal in the conditions of the health pandemic, but especially in the evolutionary conditions that we synthesized in our study.

The year 2020 did not offer us anything spectacular on election day, as happened in 2014 or 2019, when there were upheavals generated by social networks. Consequently, we will not discuss the political communication on social networks this year in detail because we consider that we do not bring anything new to the study. We only mention that the adoption has been increasing and, out of the desire to provide the reader with the most up-to-date information, we will use some data to support our theory collected at the end of March 2022.

As already mentioned, the role of social networks is the same both during election campaigns and between election campaigns. Online communication is always done, and social networks have become the main channel where political information is disseminated. Basically, they are indispensable and irreversible.

In order to demonstrate the adoption mentioned in the previous lines, following the analysis of the Facebook pages, we notice that on March 30, 2022, the President of Romania has the most fans on his page, approaching 2

million (more precisely 1.8 million), PNL maintains the first place among the party pages with 477 thousand fans, followed by USR with 274 thousand and PSD with 188 thousand fans.

As for Twitter, we find that the adoption of political communication is very slow. At the moment, the channel is preferred by more young people, precisely because of its exposure to political issues to a lesser extent than other networks. However, we exemplify and retain 235,820 followers for Klaus Iohannis, 5,481 for USR, 3,332 for PSD and 605 for PNL. For PNL, the last posts we found are from May 25, 2019, the Twitter account seems abandoned, hence the small number of followers. From the research on the accounts of politicians, we also noticed a few followers, as well as an exposure of political messages with a rarer or very rare frequency to some of them or accounts where nothing has been posted for months, even years.

### **Conclusions**

The importance of social networks in political communication is even greater as its role is to be the main channel of communication and occupies a special place in election campaign strategies. The health crisis that humanity has been facing for the last two years supports this hypothesis, with election campaigns taking place in a very large percentage in the online environment, of course with its limitations and advantages. The present positions social networks as the main channel of political communication, and political actors who do not understand and do not use it cancel all their chances in the electoral competition. Basically, they become invisible to the masses of voters. We note that the emergence of social networks has changed the relationship between elected officials and voters, with citizens having the opportunity to take an active part in the political life of states. Through social networks, the political message is disseminated and debated incomparably more than traditional methods, the users of social networks being also vectors of political communication, of influencing the masses, but also content creators, not only consumers.

An advantage for the political environment is that the online environment retains a lesser feeling that the population only matters to politicians every four years, as is the case in traditional media. The reason is extremely simple to understand – in online political communication is done at any time, without temporary limitation. Politicians address the masses or individuals much more easily during election campaigns, but also between election competitions. Online communities are much more numerous now than in previous years, and politicians can interact with their voters throughout their term. As an open spaces, the social networks contributes decisively to political communication and interaction, but also to the emergence of political ideas. Electoral behavior of voters has also changed –



now it is a type of electorate more educated, more active, more demanding, always up to date with news, accustomed to online media or interpersonal communication through messages. It has thus become mandatory for politicians to adapt and for their political messages to be made in line with the demands of this type of electorate.

We believe that future electoral strategies will be built exclusively on social networks and the online environment will open up new opportunities for politicians to redefine their political communication, to make it more effective and to gain as much social influence as possible.

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