

REPORT

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung &
Foundation Media Democracy

MEDIA MONITORING
LABORATORY

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Bulgarian Media Monitoring: European election campaign 2014

As in previous years, in 2014 the Foundation Media Democracy (FMD) continues the monitoring of the media environment in cooperation with the Media Program South East Europe of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS). The report for the period January – May 2014 focuses on the election campaign for the European Parliament.

The analyses have been prepared by the team of the Media Monitoring Laboratory (Nikoleta Daskalova, Gergana Kutseva, Silvia Petrova, Marina Kirova, Bogdana Dencheva, Eli Aleksandrova, Maya Tsaneva and Vladimir Kisimdarov). The experts Georgi Lozanov and Todor P. Todorov were also invited to share their appraisal of the current developments in the media environment. Part of the monitoring is based on quantitative and qualitative data prepared by Market Links Agency for the joint analysis of FMD and KAS. In summary, the main findings, by areas of monitoring, include:

MEDIA DISCOURSE

The theme of Europe was scarce in the media talk on elections. Outside the advertising messages, media proved to be unable to address Europe with the language and problems it brings. This inability stems from the absence of sufficient dedicated journalists, from the weak expert knowledge of European issues as well as from the incapability to express and define them as significant for Bulgarian reality. There is a certain cultural reflex – the detachment from Europe, which is recognized as “there” and means a distant and foreign place incommensurable with “our” reality.

At the same time, the expectation and over-attention set in these elections reached the level of western’s suspense. The elections were presented in the media as extremely, crucially important – though not as European elections, but rather as internal political ones. Their main stake and motive was reduced in the media to the question: “Will there be early elections at home?” The whole campaign in the media revolved substantially around that, and the European dimension acquired the nuance of an advertising slogan or a luxury accessory.

NATIONAL TV CHANNELS AND DAILIES

During the first half of 2014, Boyko Borissov remained the politician who was most frequently mentioned in the monitored media, followed by Rosen Plevneliev, Sergey Stanishev and Plamen Oresharski. Among institutions, Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (Grazhdani za evropeysko razvitie na Bulgaria, abbreviated GERB) is in the first place. Behind them are the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (Dvizhenie za prava i svobodi, DPS), the Bulgarian Socialist Party (Bulgarska sotsialisticheska partiya, BSP) and the government. It is obvious that the role of DPS in the governance of the country is becoming increasingly discussed in the media. Borissov and his party retained the ability to generate attention, although it too often took the form of critical attitude towards them. Here, the principle “there is no such thing as bad publicity” was well presented. After all, the intense media presence can be valuable in itself and bring electoral success.

Among characters who expressed attitude, Nikolay Barekov aggressively displaced



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Boyko Borissov and Sergey Stanishev: a clear indication of the media rise of the former journalist and present politician. In this year, his word on key issues imperceptibly turned into a media priority. Prime Minister Oresharski is only in the fifth place – a fact highlighting his efforts to maintain an expert image and not a political one.

In television, several important trends emerged. Compared to the press, here the politics was given a greater information importance. In all four monitored media, the attitudes towards the government, Sergey Stanishev, Boyko Borissov and GERB range between the negative and neutral. The most consensual is the attitude towards DPS – it is positive virtually everywhere. And vice versa, the most polarized is the attitude towards BSP and the President. For BSP it fluctuates between the negative (in bTV and BNT) and positive (in TV7). The attitudes towards Rosen Plevneliev in turn are divided between critical (TV7) and rather affirmative (NOVA).

In dailies, the attitude towards Boyko Borissov, GERB and Rosen Plevneliev was clearly negative. With Sergey Stanishev and DPS it ranges between the negative and neutral. In the print editions as well as in electronic media, BSP again strongly polarized the attitudes: they are placed between criticism (Sega) and positive announcement (Telegraph). The press also polarized the attitude towards the government. Opposing are the attitudes of Sega (negative) and of Telegraph (positive). The media ratings representing the ratio between the positive and negative coverage remained negative for all monitored politicians, except for the Prime Minister Plamen Oresharski (1.4) and Nikolay Barekov (1.0). Volen Siderov has the lowest media rating (- 9.3), followed by Boyko Borissov (- 8.7). However, this did not prevent Borissov from winning the elections for the European Parliament, and Siderov from asking to annul them. In the elections, ultimately, the parties described by the media as either “bad” (GERB) or relatively “good” (DPS, Bulgaria Without Censorship) did best. Those who most polarize the media attitude lost (BSP). It seems voters

chose parties towards which the media have a clearer attitude and punished those who seemed more controversial.

PUBLIC BROADCASTERS AND SPECIALIZED INFORMATION MEDIA

The public service and specialized electronic and online information media (BNT, BNR, TV Europe, Bulgaria on Air, www.dnevnik.bg, www.europe.bg) put efforts for voters to make informed choice on the “Europe” theme. Compared with the rest of the media, they maintained the most neutral attitude towards the candidates for the European Parliament and offered a deeper observation of the work of the European institutions. Brussels-Sofia relations were discussed through the expertise of current members of the European Parliament, academics and analysts. However, the published reports of the former Bulgarian members of the EP as well as the information and analytical materials on Brussels institutions and on the elections in other Member States proved to be of no interest for the audience. The debates on the European Commission President did not arouse serious interest or discussion, either. The issues of energy policy, Europe-Russia relations, the crisis in Ukraine, the expansion of the labor market, the management of the refugee flow and the absorption of EU funds were popular, but at operational national level and not in the context of the EU policies.

ONLINE MEDIA AND NEWS SITES

In the period of January – May 2014, online media often reproduced and collaged news strategies and repertoires arousing associations of earlier processes and events. The Chairman of GERB Boyko Borissov came back again in the role of a central media hero – regardless of the variable and conjunctural nature of the media attitude towards him he continued to be a high-rating news person. Political actors, supported by the media framing itself, tried to recreate the confrontation model set by Borissov and Stanishev in 2009 – with personalized, dramatic and hot conflicts serving the media commercial logic. Media

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fighting in 2014, however, did not manage to reach the charge of those of five years ago. As a general rule, the media campaign for the European Parliament was led by the party leaders – whether or not the relevant leaders were present in the electoral lists of the parties. The candidates for the President of the European Commission of the major European parties remained in the periphery of the media interest, although the outgoing EP President Martin Schulz enjoyed some informational advantage.

The events in Ukraine were dominant news background of the campaign. Although not Ukraine itself, but rather Russia turned into a central subject of comments. Pro- or anti-Russian sounding was clearly present in the media coverage. The attitude towards Russia was entangled in another key issue on the online media agenda – the issue of energy policy. At the very climax of the campaign – the month of the official agitation – the sites significantly narrowed the diversity of the topics covered and focused their news resources onto the electoral process, especially on its competitive and formal character.

LIFESTYLE MEDIA

In the lifestyle area, the election campaign for the European Parliament passed without any major surprises with regard to the figures of the main participants. MEP candidates basically repeated lifestyle standards set in previous campaigns. Only the candidates of “Bulgaria Without Censorship” as a new player on the political scene were more focused on the details of their lifestyle. Their accent was the “people’s”, “pre-modern” lifestyle with an emphasis on machismo and the clear separation of gender roles. The figures of this new political formation were the ones who were the most active in their lifestyle expression, followed by the representatives of GERB and the Coalition for Bulgaria. In the whole campaign, politics was constantly put in analogy with private space, domestic sphere and body. Thus the voter was presented as an immature individual who needs parental (maternal or paternal in different political concepts) care.

Again, women were more active in the lifestyle sphere and femininity was often used as a means of political advertising. With the help of lifestyle tools, the tendency to coalescence between media and politics was legitimized.

YELLOW PRESS

In the third election campaign, after their appearance, the daily tabloids continued to function in an ecosystem of their own in which the creation of rumors and paparazzi content remained the norm. The absence of important topics and rearrangement of the political images in both editions led to clearance of space and focusing on new political characters as Nikolay Barekov and his formation “Bulgaria Without Censorship” (BWC). Other popular characters from the beginning of the year until the end of the campaign were: the MEP candidates Volen Siderov (Ataka), Ivaylo Kalfin (ABV), Sergey Stanishev (BSP) and Meglena Kuneva (Reformist Bloc), the former President and leader of ABV Georgi Parvanov, the current head of state Rosen Plevneliev, the Prime Minister Plamen Oresharski, the GERB leader Boyko Borissov. The tabloids often demonstrated their biases or antipathy to the political figures. Vseki Den led three negative campaigns simultaneously – against Meglena Kuneva, Georgi Parvanov and Rosen Plevneliev, while presenting at the same time Plamen Oresharski as a hardworking, stable and EU money absorbing prime minister. Compared to Vseki Den, the newspaper Bulgaria Dnes remained softer in its assessments of the representatives of the Bulgarian political life.

BLOGOSPHERE

With their repeated insistence on voting, the active citizens on Twitter and the blogosphere yet again showed that they are part of the most active layers of society. Along with the election theme, the civil interest in the network focused on the theme of Russia – in the context of the situation in Ukraine and Crimea and in relation to energy projects and specifically South Stream. In addition to the concerns

that Russia is pulling the strings of Bulgarian rulers, the blogosphere also produced alarming warnings of deliberate polarization of the society into Russophobes and Russophiles.

Citizens continued expressing their dissatisfaction with the representatives of all major political forces and the government (Sergey Stanishev, Boyko Borissov, Lyutvi Mestan, Delyan Peevski, Volen Siderov, Plamen Oresharski, Nikolay Barekov, Tsvetan Tsvetanov) with comments in negative, ironic and even sneering tone. Partially positive attitude was expressed towards the representatives of the Reformist Bloc. Overall, the European Parliament elections provoked strong emotions on Twitter, and the politicians with profiles in the microblogging platform used the network to refer to official pre-election information, to agitate or to attack opponents. As in the previous EP elections, in 2014, too, there has been a marked resurgence in the politicians' online activation. An important trend is the declining function of political blogs – more and more politicians abandon their blogs and switch to the creation of professionally maintained personal web pages.

FACEBOOK

The 2014 European elections campaign went off with active presence of the candidates on Facebook. Compared to the online agitation in the previous European Parliament elections in 2009, when the social network was only making its way as a means of communicating with potential voters, now it was a mandatory, although not priority, element in the strategies of the majority of the participants. The politicians themselves organized their own spaces in the website, on the territory of which both supporters and their detractors gathered. A new phenomenon in the course of the campaign was the redirecting of users from the leaders' personal profiles to the parties' web pages on Facebook.

The political advertising on Facebook was an important instrument of the election campaign, along with the constant updating of the content in the different pages.

Pictures of all kinds of events, agitation video clips and appeals, effective profile visualizations and layouts were also reinforced by advertising messages which were distributed among targeted audience in the network. The candidates with less potential and more limited opportunities for presence in the traditional media advertised themselves in Facebook the most actively.

The leadership in the political characters approval continued to be held by Boyko Borissov, followed by Meglena Kuneva, Sergey Stanishev and Antoniya Parvanova. As in the parliamentary elections in 2013, the most popular party in the social network was "Glas Naroden". "Bulgaria Without Censorship" took second place, followed by "Ataka", ABV and the Reformist Bloc.

POLITICAL ADVERTISING

The overall tone of the election campaign in the political advertising area was rather positive. A significant exception was the advertising clip of the party "Ataka", in which two value models were opposed through the use of hate speech – the "Euro-Atlantic" and the "Orthodox-Christian". The Council for Electronic Media and the Central Election Commission responded adequately and stopped the broadcasting of the clip.

In the course of the campaign, the most frequent was the advertising of "Coalition for Bulgaria" and "Bulgaria Without Censorship". GERB showed low activity. Bringing forward the advantages of the own policy and rejecting (direct, indirect) the opponent's policy was distinguished as the preferred approach in the advertising messages of most parties. Such tactics was employed by BSP, BWC, DPS and some other smaller parties. The participants in the election campaign focused on internal political issues, and Europe remained in the background. Among the issues the most frequently mentioned in the advertising messages were unemployment, income, jobs. The Russia theme was rarely included, partly in the advertising campaigns of the Reformist Bloc and "Ataka". Most participants actively used the Internet as an advertising medium.



Contact