

REPORT

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

MEDIA MONITORING
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Media Monitoring: Parliamentary Elections 2014

The Foundation Media Democracy (FMD) and the Media Program South East Europe of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) present the results of the Bulgarian media monitoring for the period June – October 2014. The focus is on the coverage of the campaign for the National Assembly elections held on 5th October. The analysis includes media environment evaluation prepared by Todor P. Todorov, Nikoleta Daskalova, Silvia Petrova, Bogdana Dencheva, Eli Aleksandrova, Maya Tsaneva and Vladimir Kisimdarov. Part of the monitoring is based on quantitative and qualitative data prepared by the agency Market Links for the joint analysis of FMD and KAS. The main findings, by areas of monitoring, include:

MEDIA DISCOURSE

The elections were marked by hypersensitivity in self-regulation manifested as self-censorship and adaptability of the media. An example of this is the temporary suspension of political and commentary programmes on the Bulgarian National Radio, but also the persistent and complete introduction of a special regime of permeability and regulation of the talk in the media field. In this situation, the free and politically active journalism was partly suspended.

Another important trend is, paradoxically, the opposite – towards spectacularity and routinizing of the event, where elections are treated by media agents as a product to be offered and innovatively presented to the audience. Such dimension tangibly detracts from the political meaning and adds to the competitive, quasi-sports, contest meaning

(competition for beauty, intelligence, originality, etc.). The political meaning of the elections is reformatted by the mass media and, in general, by the cultural industry (participation of celebrities, elections in VIP Brother, lifestyle piquant details, etc.) in legitimate prime time competition, in a show with superficial messages and “bubbling”, false cries, controlled alarm and other such signs typical as well of circus as a cultural phenomenon.

NATIONAL TV CHANNELS AND DAILIES

In recent months, the chairman of the party Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (Grazhdani za evropeysko razvitie na Bulgaria, abbreviated GERB), Boyko Borisov, continued to be the leader in the informational media presence with a considerable advantage (of 1343 references to 901 for the second in the ranking, Rosen Plevneliev, for the period 24 May – 3 October). Borisov also remained the figure that most often expressed attitudes in the media (thus exerting influence).

The good quantitative presentation of President Rosen Plevneliev strengthened in all monitored media. In some TV channels he even surprisingly displaced Boyko Borisov. This fact is mainly associated with the role of Plevneliev in relation to the forming of the caretaker government, but also reflects a change in the media attitude towards the overall policy of the President. From negative and neutral in the previous period monitored, the attitude towards him evolved in a markedly positive direction. Similar was the change regarding the leader



of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (Dvizhenie za prava i svobodi, DPS), Lyutvi Mestan. Also positive was the attitude towards the new chairman of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (Bulgarska sotsialisticheska partiya, BSP), Mihail Mihov, who has been monitored since the month of May this year. The rest of the politicians remained with negative media ratings. The government of Plamen Oresharski was criticized in all monitored TV channels and in almost all monitored newspapers. In television and print media the attitude towards the caretaker cabinet was mostly neutral.

Again, some media (both television and print media) conjuncturally changed their political orientation in 180 degrees.

The pre-election battle was marked by minor general tone and by the lack of serious clash of ideas. On the one hand, this fact could be viewed positively as it contributes to the imposition of a better style in politics. Parties become more careful in the usage of political language. On the other hand, however, there is a deficiency of important debates and journalism finds itself more or less limited to the genre of the political interview.

ONLINE MEDIA AND NEWS SITES

During the period 1 June – 10 October 2014, Boyko Borisov, Rosen Plevneliev and Plamen Oresharski continued to occupy the top three places in the Index of intense presence in news sites. The chairman of GERB strengthened and even improved his position of the most often mentioned figure in the news (index 85 of the maximum value of 100). President Plevneliev registered a decline by only two points (index 71), while the former Prime Minister Oresharski saw apparent outflow of media attention (index 56, a decrease of 10 points).

Compared to the first five months of the year, Sergey Stanishev (index 48), Georgi Parvanov (index 20) and Volen Siderov (index 17) dropped in lower positions, while Delyan Peevski (index 51), Nikolay Barekov (index 47) and Mihail Mihov (index 47) took

more central place in the media agenda. In the leading positions in the array logically appeared the name of the caretaker government Prime Minister Georgi Bliznashki appointed in August. The governor of the Bulgarian National Bank Ivan Iskrov and the European Commissioner Kristalina Georgieva made breakthrough into the leading names in the news as well.

The theme of EU-Russia relations in the context of the crisis in Ukraine and the economic sanctions against Russia continued to be among the central news stories during the last months. This central thematic nucleus, however, had little common ground with the other main topic during that period – the election campaign. An important observation is that the elections were talked about more in the months preceding the campaign than during the campaign itself. Thus, paradoxically, preconditions were created not to engage but distance the audience from the electoral process.

Another important paradox relates to the lack of essential overlap between the election theme and the topics next in severity for that period – the case with the Corporate Commercial Bank crisis and the national energy policy. Although both topics were presented as high-risk and of big socio-political importance ones, they were present as isolated thematic lines outside of the election coverage. Only the third most popular risk topic – of the natural disasters (the floods) – fell within the election context, but mostly through the political PR and image-making instruments (news about politicians who help people in distress through volunteer work). Such party and media strategies additionally detracted from the political charge of the campaign and prevented the development of an in-depth political debate. The general impression was that of a deliberately blunted campaign that the media failed to energize.

EUROPEAN THEMES

The European context carried little weight in the election campaign. In their media

appearance, the Bulgarian parties represented in the European Parliament put no accent on their belonging to the supranational political families. Although present in the media, the theme of EU-Russia relations could not turn into primary election accent. The hearings of the new European Commissioners failed to attract strong media attention.

LIFESTYLE MEDIA

The lack of bright personalities and strong political messages was clearly visible in the lifestyle media zone. Politicians are increasingly fleeing from their own political image, trying to borrow symbolic capital from the stars of popular culture. In the course of the campaign, the most significant example of this was the joint interview of Radan Kanev (Reformist Bloc) and the rapper Itso Hazarta ("Upsurt") for the *Capital* newspaper. Once again, personal relations mixed with politics, the public was translated in the language of intimacy. The politician and the rapper known for his cynical lyrics reaching vulgarity practically talked the same language ("there is no such moron", "shitty country"). Political discourse now borrows its means of expression from the lowest layers of the speech. The hero crisis and the aspiration that heroic lifestyle be attracted from the sphere of popular culture can be interpreted as another level in the collapse of the trust in politics and institutions.

During the campaign, it was observed increased interpretation of political life through the lens of astrology and numerology. After the drawing of the numbers in the integral ballot, both the media and politicians started to make numerological analyses to guess the election results according to the symbolism of the numbers. The forecasts included political as well as personal details ("Miss Doncheva will get married, Volen will not enter"). Thus the political moved into the realm of the supernatural: driven by invisible, mysterious forces, meaning also – beyond the control of the real political figures.

Politics was also presented as a disposable commodity. One of the few direct demonstrations of lifestyle image was the advertising of the effigy of Nikolay Barekov (Bulgaria without censorship, BWC) by the plastic bags in some grocery stores. In this sense, the political appears both an inevitable product of daily necessity and a threat to the ecology. On the other hand, the politician's image is reduced to an object for consumption – which justifies the lack of ideas in favour of the promise of satisfaction of desires.

Downplaying the political can also be traced in the continuing analogy with football. In this campaign, too, GERB's representatives most often used parallels between politics and football. After number nine in the integral ballot was drawn, Tsvetan Tsvetanov said that "GERB will be a center forward in this election campaign" and added that this was the number on the football shirt of the legendary footballer Georgi Asparuhov-Gundi. Another example in this direction was the refusal of Boyko Borisov to give a press conference in the election night since "from 22:00 Real Madrid are playing". Politics is no longer equated to the football game but has gone down one more level in the battle for the interest of both the voters and the politicians themselves. Political figures would prefer the image of football stars and even of fans, which is a sign of the increasingly lower prestige of politics.

YELLOW PRESS (The *Vseki Den* and *Bulgaria Dnes* daily newspapers)

A key event in the period from the European Parliament elections in May to the early parliamentary elections in October was the cessation of the negative campaign of *Vseki Den* against Rosen Plevneliev. The President was present in the tabloid's contents rather in reports and in his role of conciliator of political parties. At the same time, the negative campaigns against Georgi Parvanov (ABV) and Meglena Kuneva (Reformist Bloc) continued, although not as strong as in previous periods. The new big victim of *Vseki Den* turned out to be the former BSP leader Sergey Stanishev.

After the strong presentation of GERB in the European Parliament elections, the *Vseki Den* abruptly changed its tone – GERB and Boyko Borisov got back on the pedestal and the BSP and its former leader collapsed into the abyss. This trend was visible both in the selection of topics and interviews, and the expressed editorial opinions. Among the more unexpected twists was the change of the attitude towards Nikolay Barekov – the leader of the BWC lost his glamorous image from the pages of the *Vseki Den*.

The *Bulgaria Dnes* continued the tendency to register political blunders. The edition focused its negative attitude on the chairman of the party Ataka, Volen Siderov. The *Vseki Den* chose to ignore the nationalist parties.

FACEBOOK

The campaign for the parliamentary elections in October strengthened the trend of the outflow of civil energy and enthusiasm characteristic also of the European Parliament elections in May. While in 2013 social networks were the tribune for expression of discontent and an arena to organize protests and attract supporters for various causes, in 2014 the civil society on Facebook showed far more subdued political activity. The exhausted civil enthusiasm was evident in the lack of mass negative feeling in the social network against a specific political phenomenon or entity. The effect of the absence of a hatred catalyst also relates to the lack of motivation for voting.

The monitoring did not recognize significant differences in the number of online supporters of different persons and parties in comparison with the results during the elections in May. The most liked party on Facebook continued to be Glas Naroden (“voice of the people”). Boyko Borisov retained his leadership position among politicians and the number of his supporters exceeded by multiple times the results of his rivals. In the course of the campaign for the elections in October, strengthened support was felt towards the Reformist Bloc, which turned out to be the political choice of a large part of the active Facebook users.

The tragedy in Gorni Lom (blast in an explosives plant killed 15 people) influenced the tone of the campaign. Politicians replaced the usual calls to vote and attacks against rivals on Facebook with words of sympathy to the families of the casualties.

POLITICAL ADVERTISING

The lifeless and passive election campaign did not offer any memorable examples in the field of political advertising. There were not confrontations and heavy clashes between the major parties. It was felt that the main role of the advertising materials was to inform the electorate about the number of the respective coalition/party/candidate in the ballot.

In their campaign slogans, parties put their stake on abstract values – stability (GERB), ease (NDSV), justice (BSP), and freedom (DPS). In the advertising messages, worn promises were laid down of a million jobs (BWC), billions of euros of investments (Kuneva, RB), as well as infantile tricks – raffles for a ticket for a football match (Nastimir Ananiev of RB; ABV), a promise of free Wi-Fi in Sofia (BWC), a hint for the legalization of hemp (PP The Greens). The BSP – Left Bulgaria coalition tried to attract young unemployed voters with the promotion of the measure “Youth Guarantee”.

On the Internet, political advertising was used actively by candidate members (mostly from the RB and the BSP-Left Bulgaria) for propaganda of preferential voting. The Central Election Commission responded to cases of violations and stopped the broadcasting of campaign videos of the Bulgarian National Union – New Democracy (BNS-ND), DPS and the PP The Greens.