

## BULGARIAN MEDIA MONITORING: PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2013

ANALYSIS OF FOUNDATION MEDIA DEMOCRACY IN COOPERATION WITH THE MEDIA PROGRAM SOUTH EAST EUROPE OF KONRAD-ADENAUER-STIFTUNG

**The monitoring of Bulgarian media in the context of the parliamentary elections and the public and political processes from the beginning of 2013 showed significant changes in the nature of media coverage. The February protests, the resignation of the Borissov cabinet, and the pre-election campaign, dominated by scandals, were accompanied by a sharp reversal in the editorial policy of a great number of media. Against this background, the debate on the deficits in politics and the future of the country remained perfunctory.**

At the same time, the diagnostics of the media environment showed a rather diverse picture: there was a significant discrepancy between the agenda of mainstream media, on one side, and of social networks on the Internet, on the other. The main accents of the analysis, by areas of monitoring, include:

### NATIONAL DAILIES

During the pre-election campaign, a large number of national dailies made a conjuncture turn in their attitude towards leading political figures and parties.

The former PM and leader of the political party Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (Grazhdani za evropeysko razvitiie na Balgariya, abbreviated GERB), Boyko Borissov, preserved his significant predominance in the print media; however, the editorial attitude towards him underwent a radical turn – from highly positive in 2012, to extremely negative before the elections. The turning point came with the protests in

February. The former governing party GERB won the elections in the conditions of strong negativism on the part of the press, both towards their leader and the party itself. The negativism affected all other leaders of the big political parties as well; it was only the attitude towards the Chairman of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, (Dvizhenie za prava i svobodi (DPS), Lyutvi Meistan, that remained in the neutral zone. In the meantime, a ‘warm-up’ was felt in the coverage of the former opposition parties, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (Bulgarska sotsialisticheska partiya, BSP), DPS and Ataka (full name: Politicheska partiya Ataka), where the socialist party was put in the most favorable light. The high prices of the paid coverage of the campaign did not allow the messages of the smaller parties reach the voters. The election campaign unfolded mainly on the basis of serious political scandals, which strongly polarized the public and produced instability, which was carried over right after the elections.

### ONLINE MEDIA & NEWS SITES

From the beginning of 2013, information resources on the Internet took on negative tones. A key position in the coverage took the anti-party feelings, the discrediting rhetoric, and the accusatory tone. As a result thereof, the mass media turned into a tribune for political discrediting. A symptomatic role was played by the active media presence of figures from the public prosecutor's office, which took the third place in media coverage right after the figures of the leading parties, GERB and BSP. The leaders

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of GERB, Boyko Borissov and Tzvetan Tzvetanov, remained the subjects attracting the most intense media interest, but there was a complete turn in the nature of their presence in the media. From speaking subjects, news initiators and leading spokesmen of appraisal, the former PM and former Minister of Interior turned into a central object of appraisal, political comments and accusations. In the meantime, the leader of the socialists, Mr. Sergey Stanishev, managed to significantly shorten the distance in positions with Borissov, especially during the official period of the campaign (April-May), when the news coverage of both leaders practically leveled. A significant breach in the media presence was also made by the Chairmen of DPS and Ataka. The media drew their attention most of all towards the parties of the status quo, while the political parties from the protests enjoyed a rather transient existence.

The peculiarities of the campaign shaped a rather schizophrenic nature of media coverage. The significant attention paid to political scandals in the news functioned in opposition to the paid media campaigning. One and the same editions showed the same politicians in two opposite images: the discrediting plots compromised them, while the paid PR publications put them in a favorable light. As a whole, it was the scandals that marked media coverage, while the information stream turned into a norm one big and anti-democratic replacement: instead of debates and rational arguments, the pre-election battle was reduced to a discrediting war.

**LIFESTYLE MEDIA**

The novelty in the lifestyle media during the pre-election campaign was the withdrawal of politicians from the media. Media appearances, as a whole, did not form a part of the political lifestyle. An indicative example was the change in the image of the former PM, Boyko Borissov; his image of a media star transformed into the position of a politician who demonstratively turns his back on media: one who does not watch television, does not listen to the radio, and does not read newspapers. Yet another sign of

avoidance of traditional media on the part of politicians was the presence of Meglena Kuneva – she focused her presence on appearances in women's online editions, unlike the presidential campaign in 2011, when she preferred the print media. On the other side, Mrs. Kuneva was the only political figure that showed succession in her lifestyle image. Once again, she put her stake on the 'women's talk' putting the accent on the family, the children, the home, the house-making; even in the strict political discourse, she always tried to introduce a personal note, to sound close to 'ordinary' women and even compared politics to motherhood. The leader of BPS, on the other side, constructed his lifestyle image through the idea of fatherhood and the image of the 'father of the nation', but did not feel comfortable talking about private issues in interviews.

Despite the fact that politicians did, seemingly, divert from the lifestyle field, their discourse remained on the level of daily life, the personal, often even the local gossip. There were even mutual insults and compromising materials in the sphere. The scandal with the tapping and the disclosed records from the house and toilet of Boyko Borissov turned into a feast of intimate details. Users of media messages gladly took the role of voyeurs. The political reality show crossed the borders of show business, and even overpassed Big Brother, where records from the toilets are not broadcasted.

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

Despite the pre-election situation, the daily *Bulgaria Dnes* remained laconic on the subject of politics and focused their attention on social themes, paparazzi photos and events from the underground world. On the day for elections silence, the competitive *Vseki Den* persuaded its readers to abstain from voting in the elections. Both tabloids demonstrated more of a positive than negative attitude towards Boyko Borissov. Right before the elections, *Vseki Den* renewed the negative campaign against Mrs. Meglena Kuneva, which we saw during the presiden-

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tial elections in 2011. The attempt on the life of Ahmed Dogan in the beginning of the year brought to the fore the differences in the positions of the two newspapers towards the leaders of DPS, Ahmed Dogan and Lyutvi Mestan. *Vseki Den* presented Dogan and Mestan in a positive-heroic light, while *Bulgaria Dnes* showed its ironic attitude.

**BLOGOSPHERE**

Despite the fact that, during the last years, active citizens in the blogosphere and Twitter had been among the most severe critics of the status quo and the ruling party, the protests in February did not manage to win their categorical support and trust. In the meantime, attitudes in the blogosphere continued to be directed against the status quo, and most of all – against the two biggest political forces, GERB and BSP. If the elections were decided on the terrain of social networks, GERB and BSP would have probably not be presented in the National Assembly, while the 'Bulgaria for Citizens Movement' and 'Democrats for Strong Bulgaria' would have been parliamentary presented. The Union of Democratic Forces (Sayuz na demokratichnite sili, SDS) and the Greens (Zelenite), as well as some other small parties, also won the affections of the citizens' blogosphere. As a whole, the results from the elections were accepted with disappointment among bloggers, who did not identify themselves with the winning parties. The unaccomplished break in the status quo provoked emotions of anger, sadness and irony. Most predominant are the pessimistic prognosis for the future governance of the country.

Contrary to the active citizens' blogosphere, politicians did not show a strong presence in personal blogs. On the contrary, there is a strong tendency for politicians to leave the field of blogosphere. More adequately, but yet not more intensively, was the presence of politicians in Twitter, where they managed to find, more precisely, the successful tone of communication.

These elections showed a new tendency in social media. They turned into an arena for

political self-determination and ideological differentiation between friends and people you know.

**FACEBOOK**

Unlike the previous parliamentary elections, when online campaigns were not yet a priority, this year many of the parties invested in Facebook advertising. The most active in the social network were the newly-formed and smaller parties without parliamentary presentation. The strongest political affections in Facebook were gained by the party of the musician Svetoslav Vitkov called 'Glas Naroden' with 48 000 followers. This kept the tendency during the presidential elections in 2011, when Vitkov was again the favorite in Facebook. The second in popularity was Ataka, whose nationalistic message attracted the attention of 31 000 users. The slogan of Meglena Kuneva 'Yes to normality' and the active advertising campaign on her site won 26 000 followers for the 'Bulgaria for Citizens Movement', or third place in Facebook. Fourth with 18 000 virtual voters were 'Democrats for Strong Bulgaria', followed by the 'Modern Bulgaria Movement' with more than 16 000. Of all parties-favorites in Facebook only Ataka managed to get into the parliament after the elections.

Most of the party leaders used actively their profiles for campaigning. It is curious that they all used one and the same method: discrediting the competitors and pointing out the privileges of their own policy.

**VBOX7**

The spirit of the campaign in Vbox7 could be summed up as an upsurge of nationalism. The most popular party in the site was the nationalistic Ataka, followed by two other formations from the same political spectrum – the 'Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization' and the 'National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria'. The attitude of users towards the rest of the parties was highly disapproving and accompanied by sharp comments. The only political party which purposefully used the site to carry an active pre-election campaign was the 'Bul-

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garia for Citizens Movement'. However, the messages of Meglena Kuneva and her party remained unheard by users. The event attracting the strongest and most controversial reactions from the beginning of the year was the attempt on the life of now former leader of DPS, Ahmed Dogan.

The pre-election campaign developed the genre of video reflections – home-made video clips, in which citizens express their views on the political situation in the country and on what and how should be changed. This type of video clips generated a huge number of views and comments. However, the clips themselves, and the comments thereto, demonstrated the high degree of disorientation among users and their lack of trust in political leaders and parties.