

The media in the election campaign for the 45th Ordinary National Assembly

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How did the media report the election campaign?

The edited reflection

The media today have growingly stopped being simply an *environment*, a space where authors of messages and their audiences meet. The media have become much more often a *party* to the public debate. In this sense, the independence of particular media from the government or particular corporate interests (which allows it to have an editorial independence) still does not guarantee objectivity or pluralism of reporting events. In turn, formal combination of different points of view (often misguidedly associated with pluralism) does not guarantee quality reporting unless it goes hand in hand with a consistent pursuit of raising public awareness, impartiality and objectivity.

The subject of this study is the objectivity, pluralism and impartiality of the media coverage of the election campaign for the 45th Ordinary National Assembly in the period from 1 March to 5 April 2021 inclusive.

The specific profile of the media environment in Bulgaria has determined the nature and forms of coverage of the election campaign. The image of the election campaign in the media encompasses both the specific actions of the participants as well as the position of the media themselves. The analysis has shown that *the coverage has been edited* in line with the media's editorial policy and corporate profile. In this sense, reporting of public opinion has been complemented by a certain imbalance favoring interpretation over information.¹

A considerable number of the examined texts instill the idea that *the fairness of elections and integrity of the election process in general are in jeopardy*. The latter suggestion has most often been observed in the texts published by the media that declared themselves to be "anti-GERB"². The main thesis has been that as long as the government of GERB organized the elections, the elections could be "stolen"³. The thesis has been further enhanced by the topic of video surveillance of reporting of the election outcome.⁴

¹ „В България започна голямото отвличане на внимание“, Mediapool, 7 март 2021 г., <https://www.mediapool.bg/v-bulgaria-zapochva-golyamoto-otvlichane-na-vnimanie-news319094.html>

² Специфичен пример в това отношение е статията: „ГЕРБ получи паричен бонус от държавата за предизборната си кампания“, публикуван в електронния сайт на вестник „Сега“, 9 март 2021 г., <https://www.segabg.com/hot/category-bulgaria/gerb-poluchi-parichen-bonus-durzhavata-za-predizbornata-si-kampaniya>

³ „3 потресаващи разказа на наблюдатели на вота“, Offnews, 5 април 2021 г., <https://offnews.bg/izbori/3-potresavashiti-razkaza-na-nabliudатели-na-vota-749277.html>

⁴ „Няма да има видеонаблюдение на изборите“, в сайта „Дебати“, 2 април 2021 г., <https://debati.bg/nyama-da-ima-videonablyudenie-na-izborite/>

The media have intentionally created the perception of a real likelihood for the elections to be rigged⁵ and, what is more, for opposition parties and extra-parliamentary parties to challenge the election outcome⁶. This thesis has been developed in detail by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) prior to the beginning of the election campaign.

Meanwhile hardly any publications have been observed presenting the election rules and the latest amendments to them, the very rules that have been suggested as likely to be violated. *Information content of the texts has remained relatively low* unlike the abundance of specific interpretations⁷.

The latter can be clearly seen from the coverage of the voting machines, as interpretations and the pursuit to promote this voting technology have prevailed over raising public awareness about how to vote using these machines⁸. The most common message has been about the fairness of reporting of the election outcome⁹, while, in fact, voting machines can help minimize the mistakes made by voters, especially during the preferential voting.

The majority of the examined texts are dominated by *the explicit personal opinion of the journalists or authors*. The latter trend has been most often manifested in reviews or analytical texts¹⁰. The majority of the analyzed texts are characterized by a generalizing and critical comment; even where the texts start reporting a specific event, they quickly shift from reportage to generalizations about the overall course of action or profile of the political party or politician concerned. A particular feature of the media coverage of this election campaign has been making references to foreign media sources¹¹ or public figures¹².

Each event pertaining to the President has been covered in great detail during the election campaign, with a clear emphasis on the strong antagonism between the government and him¹³. During the campaign the President's public image continued to be developed as the

⁵ „До 150 000 души може да бъдат отрязани от гласуване“, сайт на вестник „Сега“, 7 март 2021 г., <https://www.segabg.com/hot/category-bulgaria/150-000-dushi-mozhe-da-budat-otryazani-glasuvane>

⁶ „Как се фалшифицират избори?“, сайт на вестник „Сега“, 14 март 2021 г., <https://www.segabg.com/category-video/kak-se-falshificirat-izbori>

⁷ „Всичко, което трябва да знаете за парламентарните избори“, сайт на вестник „Дневник“, 3 март 2021 г., https://www.dnevnik.bg/izbori_2021/2021/03/03/4181403_vsichko_koeto_triabva_da_znaete_za_parlamentarni/?ref=home_layer2

⁸ „Как се гласува машинно? Демонстрация в студиото на „Денят започва“, БНТ, 31 март 2021 г., <https://bnt.bg/news/kak-se-glasuva-mashinno-demonstraciya-v-studioto-na-denyat-zapochva-v293757-293683news.html?page=20>

⁹ „Росица Матева от ОС към ЦИК: Избирателите трябва да са спокойни“, БНР, 19 март 2021 г., <https://bnr.bg/post/101439309/rosica-mateva-ot-os-kam-cik-izbiratelite-trabva-da-sa-spokoini-za-mashinoto-glasuvane>

¹⁰ „Спортисти, актьори, музиканти, водещи... Изборите се превръщат в шоу“, сайт „Дебати“, 6 март 2021 г., <https://debati.bg/sportisti-muzikanti-aktyori-vodeshti-izborite-se-prevrashtat-v-shou/>

¹¹ „Германските медии за вота у нас...“, Offnews, 5 април 2021 г., <https://offnews.bg/dw/germanskite-medii-za-vota-u-nas-aferala-s-pachkite-na-noshntoto-shkaf-749329.html>

¹² „Германски дипломат: След изборите България ще си остане в плен на беззаконието и корупцията“, OffNews, 31 март 2021 г., <https://offnews.bg/dw/germanski-diplomat-sled-izborite-balgaria-shte-si-ostane-v-plen-na-be-748966.html>

¹³ Например, статията : „Ковид-мярка“ анти-Радев погнуса Варна“, вестник „Сега“, 12 март 2021 г., <https://www.segabg.com/hot/category-bulgaria/kovid-myarka-anti-radev-pognusi-varna>

main opponent of the ruling majority¹⁴. This image has been integrated into the constructed perception of the “protests” as a collective image, manifesting general criticism of the institutions and the government.

How did the political parties and politicians communicate in the election period?

An amalgam of intersecting monologues

The main *tone of strong antagonism* was set long before the official election campaign was launched. Over the past months the public discourse has been full of aggressive calls and overt interpersonal invective. The latter discourse that had been encouraged during the protests prevailed both in the plenary as well as the media activities of politicians from various political parties.

Politicians’ treatment of the media has been determined by their perception of the media as an “accelerator” or “a loudspeaker” helping them reach the mass audience. *Bulgarian politicians still live by the perception of the mass-media*, a model whereby there is a single source of information and a mass audience and that appearing before this audience can sufficiently guarantee that their message will be heard, noticed and understood.

The latter attitude determined the rather *instrumental character of the dialogue with the journalists and the media*. The relatively occasional interviews with politicians¹⁵ (used first and foremost as a form of campaigning) have been rather schematic, asking questions in line with the main topics chosen by the politicians. The politicians’ demands to the electronic media had to do with the time they could make statements or rather challenge the statements made by others.

The overall monitoring of the selected period showed that in the majority of cases *the politicians did not try to engage in a dialogue with the public*. Given the available information and telecommunication channels, most political parties preferred to go back to paper posters, slogans and leaflets. Even the political parties that made the utmost use of the social media (such as There Are Such People or Democratic Bulgaria) did use the media mainly to *transfer and disseminate quickly messages and not organize forums or discussions using the existing platforms*.

The general conclusion from all these observations boils down to the understanding that *Bulgarian political parties and politicians, in fact, have no clear idea about who they represent*, about the trust of which groups of the Bulgarian public they fight for. That is why most parties and politicians preferred to talk among themselves, address everyone simultaneously or disseminate their messages via the social media.

¹⁴ „Радев: „Съкрушителна оценка“ за корупцията в България от сенатори в САЩ“, БНР, 5 март 2021 г., <https://bnr.bg/post/101431987/prezidentat-radev-sakrushitelna-ocenka-za-korupciata-v-balgaria-ot-senatori-v-sasht>

¹⁵ „Адв. Хаджигенов: Социологията на ГЕРБ е фалшива...“, сайт „Дебати“, 12 март 2021 г., <https://debati.bg/aadv-hadzhi-genov-za-debati-bg-sotsiologiyata-na-gerb-e-falshiva-sled-izborite-shte-vidim-istinskite-rezultati/>

In conclusion, it can be pointed out that objectivity¹⁶ in the coverage of the campaign has been critical for a relatively small number of the examined texts. The measured index rate is 0,4. Pluralism¹⁷ (with an aggregate value of 0,3) has been limited at the expense of upholding and covert partiality¹⁸ or overt propaganda for a certain interpretation of the events (0,6). Therefore, the election campaign served to *make the shortcomings of the Bulgarian media environment stand out* rather than shape adequate public expectations about the election outcome.

The publications posted on the websites of electronic and print media have been subject to monitoring. The monitoring took place in the period from 1st March to 5th April 2021 inclusive.

The monitoring did not include publications from the election news feed, paid content and publications in the social media. The monitoring scope was thus limited to the above publications based on the understanding that it is the websites of electronic and print media that target the broadest possible audience.

Online news portals: www.dnevnik.bg; www.mediapool.bg; www.faktor.bg; www.offnews.bg; www.dir.bg

Newspapers: www.trud.bg; www.segabg.com; www.standartnews.com; www.monitor.bg

Television stations: BNT, BTV, Nova TV, TV Europe, Bulgaria On Air

Radio stations and news agencies: BNR – Horizont Programme, Darik Radio,

Radio Focus, www.focus-news.net; www.dariknews.bg; <https://bgnes.bg>

Objectivity, pluralism and the presence of a covert election propaganda in media publications were the subject of study. The findings were quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed applying the content analysis methodology.

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¹⁶ The objectivity index consists of three components: reference to a publicly available information source; exhaustive presentation of facts; clearly displayed point of view from which the facts are interpreted. The index is measured from 0 to 1, given that the three components have equal weight in the forming of the total value.

¹⁷ The pluralism index consists of two components: the presence of more than one point of view to the commented events and facts and how exhaustive the latter views are to the commented facts and events. The index is rated from 0 to 1.

¹⁸ The impartiality index (from 0 to 1) is formed based on the relative share of texts where there is no covert intimation in support of any political party or coalition.