ONLINE POLITICAL CAMPAIGN IN ROMANIA'S ELECTIONS (2016-2020). A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

Stefan MAROSAN[*]

Abstract: The extent that social media has taken in the last decade in building social life (information, interaction, and group-building) has allowed political parties to interact directly with voters during political campaigns. This article focuses on how the literature has chosen to analyse the involvement of politics in social media during the electoral campaigns in Romania in the period 2016-2020. Based on a systematic literature review, this study aims to identify possible new perspectives for analysing election campaigns in social media.

<u>Keywords</u>: social media; political party; electoral campaign; Romania

INTRODUCTION

THE DEVELOPMENT AND DIVERSIFICATION OF MEANS OF COMMUNICATION in recent decades have determined changes in how people receive information, interact and form groups. Virtual space has taken over many aspects of communication in the real world; simultaneously, it has created many other patterns that remain specific only to the online environment. Naturally, in this transformative setting, politics could not remain unchanged. Political communication strategies and electoral campaigns have changed significantly in these decades. In this context, this article analyses the manifestation of political parties in Romania in the online environment, especially social media, during the electoral campaigns, based on a systematic review of the existing literature.

The context of this study is relevant from several perspectives. On the one hand, understanding democracy in the 21st century is facilitated by explaining how social media and information and communication technologies are instrumentalized by political parties to communicate and mobilize the electorate

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[*] Stefan Marosan, MA Student in *Leadership and Communication in International Organisations.* Department of International Studies and Contemporary History, Babes-Bolyai University (Romania) ORCID: 0000-0002-6203-5757. Email: stefann.marosan@gmail.com

during election campaigns (Hassler et al., 2021). On the other hand, the significant increase in the use of social media in electoral campaigns in the last decade makes Romania a relevant case study for explaining how the political class manifests itself in the digital space (Androniciuc, 2016).

Several studies (Sasu & Androniciuc, 2017; Momoc, 2018) analyse the role of social platforms such as Facebook or YouTube in defining and transmitting political identity in debates regarding European integration. The strength of Facebook in mobilizing the electorate during the electoral campaigns in Romania is a study that deserves to be deepened (Tasenţe, 2020) because it proved significant both in the elections for the European Parliament (2019) and in the parliamentary (2016, 2020) and presidential (2019) elections). Likewise, Facebook was a communication tool used on a large scale by some extremist political formations during the COVID-19 pandemic (Doicar & Creţan, 2021).

This article aims to identify the major approaches in the literature regarding electoral campaigns in Romania in the online environment and present possible new directions for approaching this topic in the context of the increasing role of social platforms in determining citizens' electoral behaviour.

RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

This Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is necessary to observe the range of topics that the existing literature addresses when analysing the electoral behaviour of Romanian political parties in social media. In this sense, we used the literature that refers to the parliamentary elections (2016 and 2020), the elections for the European Parliament (2019) and the presidential elections (2019) in Romania.

Research questions

In conducting this SLR, we defined three research questions:

- ✍ **RQ 1.** What are the main themes and topics addressed in studies on the use of social networks in electoral campaigns in Romania?
- ✍ **RQ 2.** What are the main methods used to analyse the use of social media by political parties in Romania?
- ✍ **RQ 3.** What gaps exist in the existing literature on the use of social networks in electoral campaigns in Romania, and what research directions could be explored in the future?

To comprehensively address RQ 1 and RQ2, this SLR has been conducted based on Page et al.'s (2020) methodological guidelines for the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses) process.

Eligibility criteria

The works published in peer-reviewed journals from 2017-2022 (CR 1), in English or Romanian (CR 2), were selected for this SLR. Instead, studies that had more than three authors (CR 3) did not mention the topic of the relationship between social media and political parties in the title (CR 4) or in the abstract (CR 5), did not refer to elections (euro)parliamentary (2016, 2019, 2020) or presidential (2019) (CR 6), did not clearly state the research objectives, the methods used and the results obtained (CR 7) and did not have the text of the study available in its entirety (CR 8).

Information sources

An automated search was based on the following scientific databases to identify relevant references: Google Scholar, SpringerLink, WorldCat, EBSCO and Jstor. Based on the above-mentioned research questions, this SLR used some specific terms along with synonyms as they appear below:

- "social media" OR Facebook OR YouTube
- "electoral campaign" OR elections OR "political parties"
- Romania OR "Social Democratic Party" OR "National Liberal Party" OR "Save Romania Union" OR "Alliance for Romanians Unity".

Data collection ran between May and June 2023. In all this period, the extractions were done by automatic search using a library browser followed by a subsequent step where a manual selection was needed. Due to the lack of references on the topic of this study, following several combinations of the above terms, the JSTOR database was removed from the study.

Results

Initially, 496 titles were identified that resulted from the various combinations of the items "social media", "Facebook", "YouTube", "political parties", "online", and "elections". Next, six scanning stages were completed, as described in Figure 1.
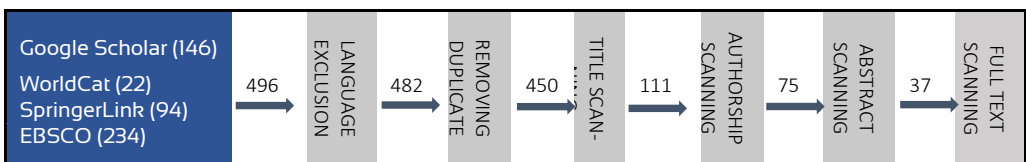
Figure 1 – *Primary studies selection*

After filtering the initial references through the seven exclusion criteria, a list of 37 peer-reviewed articles and chapters resulted. They were read and analysed, looking at what they were: the research objectives and questions, the methods used, and the results obtained. Finally, after analysing these articles, 10 studies remained that entered the review stage.
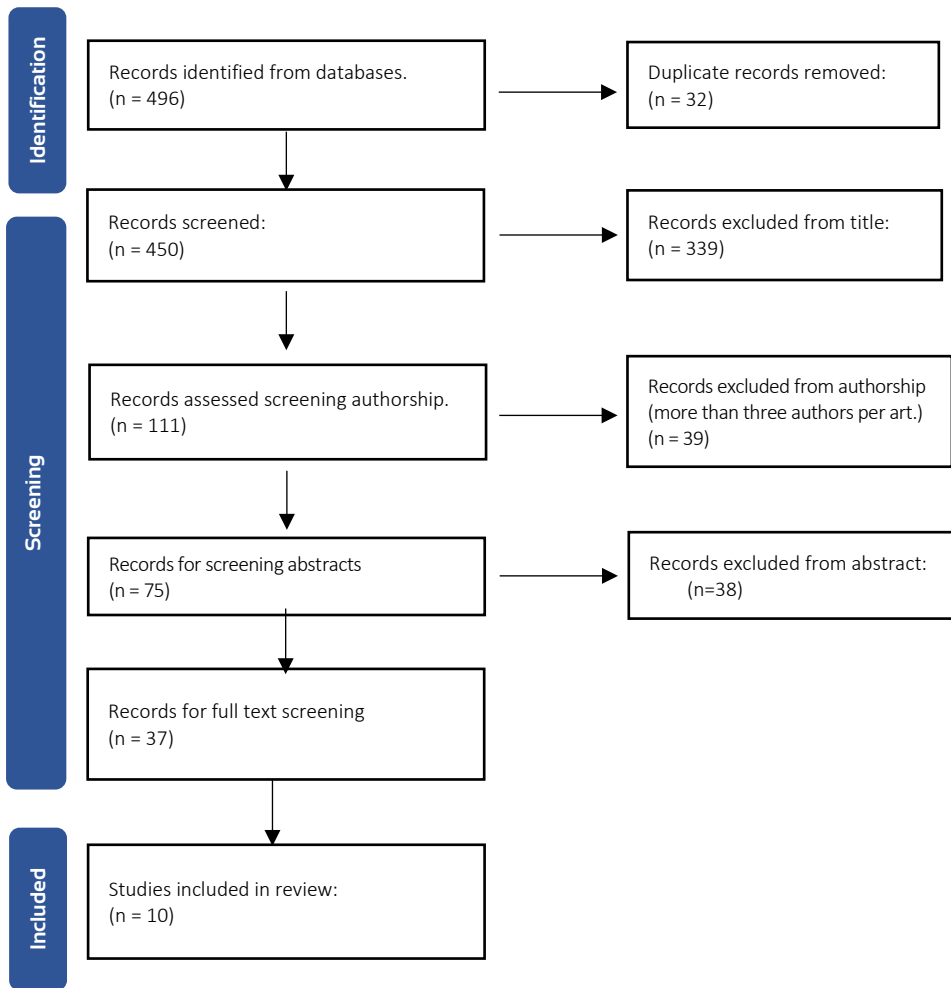
| Identification | Records identified from databases. (n = 496) | → | Duplicate records removed: (n = 32) |

Screening	Records screened: (n = 450)	→	Records excluded from title: (n = 339)
	Records assessed screening authorship. (n = 111)	→	Records excluded from authorship (more than three authors per art.) (n = 39)
	Records for screening abstracts (n = 75)	→	Records excluded from abstract: (n=38)
	Records for full text screening (n = 37)		

| Included | Studies included in review: (n = 10) | | |

Figure 2 – *PRISMA flow diagram*

Table 1 shows their description from the perspective of the research objects/questions, the methods used, and the results obtained.

Author(s)	Objectives / Research Questions	Methods	Results
Androniciuc & Barreto (2018)	Investigating the use of social networks by Romanian politicians.	Content and statistical analysis of Facebook posts by politicians.	Mobilization messages generate high engagement; the parliamentary campaign focuses more on the presentation of the candidates.
Androniciuc & Moreno (2018)	Comparing online political campaigns (Spain 2015 vs. Romania 2016).	Statistical analysis via SPSS of Facebook posts.	Differences in the communication objectives of political parties in the two countries.
Doiciar & Cretan (2021)	Understanding the distribution of votes for AUR and the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic.	Mixed method: election data, secondary online data, semi-structured interviews.	The typical AUR voter is young, high school educated, and lives in a small town or rural area.
Gherghina & Rusu (2021)	Analysing the influence of the electoral campaign on first-time voters.	Individual data from an online survey conducted during the presidential elections in November 2019.	Trust in politicians, campaign information, and the use of social networks influence voters; those with higher political knowledge are guided by their pre-election attitudes.
Grad & Marian (2020)	Explaining the change in the electoral marketing of PSD.	Analysis of two Facebook pages and an online platform where video testimonials were published.	Experience, leadership change, and the perception of new opportunities led to the success of PSD in the 2016 elections.
Marian (2018)	Analysing PSD's 2016 political campaign.	Analysis of PSD's political campaign in the 2016 parliamentary elections.	PSD's electoral strategy was based on the political message and program, using different tools to attract new supporters.
Momoc (2018)	Establishing the characteristics of populist ideology and the extent to which Romanian political parties have adopted populism.	Analysis of online discourses and values promoted on social networks (Facebook) by political parties in the 2016 parliamentary elections.	Digital democracy is a form of so-called direct democracy, possible especially online due to new technologies that offer all users the chance to express themselves, participate, interact, and get involved.
Sasu & Androniciuc (2017)	Describing the use and evolution of social networks, with a focus on the political field.	Counting daily posts during the presidential campaign and formulating descriptive statistics.	In 2014, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis became the first politician in Europe to reach a million fans on Facebook.
Țăran & Ormenișan (2020)	What types of content were used on the Facebook pages of politicians and parties during the European elections in Romania? Which candidates and parties led the most intense campaign on Facebook, according to post frequency?	This quantitative research aims to analyse how Romanian political parties and candidates used Facebook in the electoral campaign for the European Parliament, in May 2019.	Romania's strict election laws push parties and politicians to accept the freedom offered by social networks, this unregulated political campaign territory.
Tasente (2020)	Analysing key performance indicators (KPIs) that facilitate communication on social networks in the	To achieve the research objectives, both quantitative and qualitative methods will be used. Thus, we analysed the Facebook	The National Liberal Party managed to mobilize the electorate on social networks much better than its opponents. At the end of the electoral campaign, PNL had

Author(s)	Objectives / Research Questions	Methods	Results
	2019 European parliamentary elections in Romania. Identifying and analysing messages that generate high engagement.	communication campaign during the electoral campaign of the three main parties in Romania, which obtained the most mandates in the European Parliament: the National Liberal Party (PNL), the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the Save Romania Union (USR).	293,677 fans on Facebook, 2.32 times more than USR and 3.39 times more fans than PSD.

Table 1 – *Reviewed studies analyses*

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 2 shows the main observations from the content analysis of the 10 previously selected studies.

Study	Methods	Common Themes	Different Themes	Results
Androniciuc & Barreto (2018)	Content and statistical analysis	Use of social networks by Romanian politicians; Voter mobilization	Investigation of the use of social networks by Romanian politicians	Mobilization messages generate high engagement
Androniciuc & Moreno (2018)	Statistical analysis using SPSS	Comparison of online political campaigns; Voter mobilization	Comparison of online political campaigns between Spain and Romania	Differences in the communication objectives of political parties in the two countries
Doiciar & Cretan (2021)	Mixed method: election data, secondary online data, semi-structured interviews	Analysis of voter behaviour	Understanding the distribution of votes for AUR and the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic	The typical AUR voter is young, high school educated, and lives in a small town or rural area
Gherghina & Rusu (2021)	Individual data from an online survey	Analysis of voter behaviour; Online electoral campaigns; Voter mobilization	Analysis of the influence of the electoral campaign on first-time voters	Trust in politicians, campaign information, and use of social networks influence voters
Grad & Marian (2020)	Analysis of two Facebook pages and an online platform	Analysis of political marketing strategies	Explaining the change in PSD's electoral marketing	Experience, leadership change, and perception of new opportunities led to PSD's success in the 2016 elections
Marian (2018)	Analysis of PSD's political campaign	Analysis of political marketing strategies; Online electoral campaigns	Analysis of PSD's 2016 political campaign	PSD's electoral strategy was based on the political message and program
Momoc (2018)	Analysis of online discourses and values promoted	Political ideology in the online environment	Identifying the characteristics of populist ideology and the extent to which	Romanian political parties adopt populist ideology in the

Study	Methods	Common Themes	Different Themes	Results
	on social networks (Facebook)		Romanian political parties have adopted populist ideology	context of digital democracy
Sasu & Androniciuc (2017)	Counting daily posts during the presidential campaign	Use of social networks by Romanian politicians	Describing the use and evolution of social networks, with emphasis on the political field	In 2014, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis became the first politician in Europe with a million fans on Facebook
Țăran & Ormenișan (2020)	Quantitative research on the use of Facebook in the electoral campaign for the European Parliament	Online electoral campaigns; Use of social networks in elections; Voter mobilization	Analysis of the types of content used on Facebook by politicians and parties during the European elections in Romania	Romania's strict election laws push parties and politicians to use social networks as an unregulated political campaign territory
Tasente (2020)	Quantitative and qualitative methods	Key performance indicators in communication on social networks; Online electoral campaigns	Analysis of the key performance indicators (KPIs) facilitating communication on social networks in Romania's 2019 European parliamentary elections	The National Liberal Party mobilized the electorate on social networks much more effectively than its opponents

Table 2 - *Analysis of Methods, Themes and Results of Studies Concerning the Use of Social Networks in Electoral Campaigns in Romania*

From the perspective of the three research questions formulated at the beginning of this study, the following analyses can be outlined.

The main themes and topics addressed in studies on the use of social networks in electoral campaigns in Romania.

The studies analysed earlier emphasises the crucial role of social networks in Romanian politics, focusing on themes such as the mobilisation of the electorate, the adoption of "digital democracy", online electoral strategies and the impact of social networks on new voters.

First, research by Androniciuc & Barreto (2018) and Tasente (2020) underlines how social networks, especially Facebook, have become tools for mobilising the electorate. Tasente (2020) indicates that the National Liberal Party has successfully mobilised the electorate through social media compared to competing political parties.

On the other hand, "digital democracy" is taking shape as a new emerging democratic model in Romanian politics. According to research by Momoc (2018), social networks enable the adoption of this form of direct democracy, allowing users to express themselves, interact, participate, and get involved.

Online electoral strategies are another essential aspect. The study by Marian (2018) reveals that the Social Democratic Party used a complex mix of political messages and tools to attract new supporters in the 2016 campaign. In another study, Grad & Marian (2020) point out that strategic developments, changes of leaders and the perception of new opportunities led to the success of the PSD in the same elections.

Finally, the impact of social media on new voters was discussed by Gherghina & Rusu (2021). They found that trust in politicians, campaign information, and social media use significantly affected voter behaviour.

The main methods used to analyse the use of social media by political parties in Romania.

An analysis of the existing literature reveals a preponderance of content analyses and statistical analyses, but mixed methods combine these approaches with others.

For example, Androniciuc and Moreno (2018) used statistical analysis to compare online political campaigns in Spain and Romania. Through statistical analysis, they identified significant differences in the communication objectives of the political parties in the two countries. The method utilized involved the analysis of Facebook posts using SPSS software, which allowed for a more detailed examination of the data.

Similarly, in the register of statistical analysis, Sasu and Androniciuc (2017) operated a similar method to describe the use and evolution of social networks in the political context. The authors counted daily Facebook posts during the presidential campaign and formulated descriptive statistics, thus highlighting trends and patterns of political behaviour online.

On the other hand, research by Gherghina and Rusu (2021) used individual data from an online survey to analyse the influence of the election campaign on first-time voters. This method provided an insight into how electoral attitudes and behaviours can be influenced by campaign information. The survey allowed the authors to observe voter perceptions and attitudes directly, while statistical data analysis revealed significant trends and patterns.

Although content and statistical analysis are the most common methods, some studies combine these methods with others to provide a more complex picture. For example, Doicar and Creţan (2021) used a mixed method, combining electoral data, online secondary data, and semi-structured interviews to understand the distribution of votes for the AUR party and the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These diverse research approaches reflect the complexity of the field and the need to use methods that can portray the nuances of the interaction between politics and social media. In this sense, the existing literature on online electoral campaigns in Romania provides a real knowledge base and opens new possibilities for future research.

Gaps exist in the existing literature and possible new perspectives.

Following the review of the existing literature on electoral campaigns and the involvement of the political class in social media, some observations are necessary.

Analysis of Alternative Social Platforms: Most studies use Facebook as a primary political communication and campaigning platform. However, there are many other social platforms where political parties and their leaders are starting to communicate with voters (Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok). They should become an object of analysis in the perspective of the future elections in 2024 when, unlike in 2016, the generation of young people who are used to these social media platforms will also participate in the vote.

Online-offline interaction: There needs to be more research to analyze the link between the online and offline behaviour of voters. The study of electoral behaviour becomes as necessary as political communication. A closer examination of how online campaigns influence offline actions, such as voter turnout, may provide a better understanding of the effectiveness of these campaigns. In this sense, the study by Gherghina and Rusu (2021) can constitute a possible direction for research.

Longitudinal analysis of the evolution of social media campaign strategies: Existing research mainly focuses on a single election campaign or a limited period. In the context in which political communication and the electoral campaign have also expanded online, at least since 2012, in-depth research on the evolution of electoral mechanisms is necessary. It could offer a year-round perspective on voters' behaviour and electoral psychology. This fact helps to make the efforts of political parties more efficient during election campaigns.

Research on specific demographics: In addition to studying individualized social media election campaigns, many existing studies focus on voters in general. However, the analysis should be extended to distinct demographic groups (e.g., youth, elderly, rural vs urban populations) to explain electoral behaviour and political communication in depth.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article went through a PRISMA systematic review of the existing literature on the relationship between political parties and the electorate in social media during the last electoral campaigns in Romania (2016-2020). Based on this analysis, most studies focus on individual election rounds and the entire electoral population. The predominant research methods are content analysis and statistical analysis.

Following the analysis, this study proposed four additional perspectives for approaching the parliamentary and presidential elections in Romania: analysis of alternative social platforms; online-offline interaction; longitudinal analysis of the evolution of social media campaign strategies; research on specific demographics. This expansion of research directions could be helpful for an in-depth understanding of electoral behaviour and political communication in the next election rounds, in which the electoral population that massively uses social media for information gathering, interaction and building social groups will increase.

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