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**Party digitalization: a non-partisan
matter? Media narratives on party
digitalization in Bulgaria**

Petar Bankov



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Abstract

The use of online tools for internal and external party communication is an established part of party politics in Central and Eastern Europe. This development became further catalysed by the COVID-19 pandemic as parties heavily relied on such tools in their recent election campaigns at local and national levels. By far the most experience in this respect has been gathered in Bulgaria, which held four parliamentary elections between April 2021 and October 2022. This article explores the media narratives on party digitalization from key media outlets in the period between 2020 and 2022. Has party digitalization been perceived as a vehicle for narrowing the gap between political parties and society or does this gap seem to have grown by the extensive use of online tools? The findings of this work would help us understand the effects of party digitalization on its relations with wider society.

Keywords

party communication, Central and Eastern Europe, parliamentary elections, party digitalization, online tools

Author

Petar Bankov is a Lecturer and Research Assistant of Politics at the School of Social & Political Sciences at University of Glasgow. His research interests include comparative party politics, political parties, political participation, public opinion, and populism. E-mail: petar.bankov@glasgow.ac.uk.

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Introduction

Digitalization has been growing among political parties in Central and Eastern Europe. Parties from the region adopt online tools for their internal and external communication at a steady pace, which already has made noticeable impact on their political work (Surowiec and Štětka, 2018). Party digitalization has been further catalysed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when social distancing regulations limited the party abilities to literally reach out to supporters, voters, and wider society in general. While the growing literature on party digitalization traced the ways parties in Central and Eastern Europe adopt and use online tools (Dommert and Rye, 2018; Oross and Gherghina, 2023; Oross and Tap, 2023), as well as the factors shaping party digitalization (González-Cacheda, Cancela Outeda and Cordal, 2022; Whitesell, Reuning and Hannah, 2023), particularly during electoral campaigns (Metag and Marcinkowski, 2012; Jacuński et al., 2021). We also know what party members and candidates think of the use of various communication tools by their parties and the rationale for the usefulness of online tools (Jacuński, 2018). While their perspective indicates the internal relationship between party organisation and active members, little is known about what the wider societies in the region think of party digitalization.

This article addresses this gap by looking into the media narratives of party digitalization in Bulgaria in the period between 2020 and 2022. Media plays an important role for forming and channelling public opinion, so the way it presents party digitalization would have a significant impact on how wider society may view it. Bulgaria is a typical case of party digitalization in Central and Eastern Europe, as the parties in the country gradually adopt a variety of online tools in their daily communication with the public (Metodieva, 2014). The 2020-2022 period was one of intense political competition, marked by four parliamentary elections, which made party work and, thus, party digitalization more visible in the public sphere for an extended period of time. Based on a thematic and narrative analysis of media reports from main Bulgarian media outlets, this article reveals that party digitalization is being presented as part of broader trends in online behaviour and communication, and, more importantly, as a politicized matter, which reveals the party stance on anti-corruption and public transparency. This is because party digitalization is being associated by the Bulgarian media not only with the activities of political parties online, but also with their advocacy (or opposition) for technological innovation as a means to fight corruption and improve the social trust in political institutions. Nevertheless, Bulgarian media notes that the

transparency party digitalization seems to promote also enables parties to extend their control over their public communication by being able to avoid engaging with challenging topics and questions.

These findings are important for three key reasons. First, they challenge the normative understanding of party digitalization as a non-politicized matter that may depend on party resources or internal will to adopt new technologies for party work. Instead, the Bulgarian media narratives seem to emphasise the subjective, politicized drivers of party digitalization. Therefore, party digitalization may need to be viewed not just as a process of technical advancement, but also as a strategy or tactic that a party adopts in line with its ideological or policy positions. Second, these findings reveal a context, within which party digitalization occurs and is being shaped. Particularly, Bulgaria is a rather young democracy with an ongoing erosion of democratic institutions (Dawson and Hanley, 2016), against which there is a noticeable social and political resistance (Stoyanova, 2018). In such circumstances party digitalization may be integrated within broader political debates and, thus, contribute to a heightened polarization. This is an important insight for practitioners and policymakers, but also for party activists, which may need to recognise such a context when advocating for (or against) the further party digitalization. Finally, these findings provide important empirical knowledge on existing narratives in Central and Eastern Europe that could be the basis for future comparative work with other cases. Beyond the politicized nature of party digitalization, as depicted by Bulgarian media, it should be noted that media narratives are mainly concerned with the negative aspects of party digitalization (spread of disinformation and misinformation; limited public accountability under a veil of transparency). Whether such perspectives are shared elsewhere is an important question for future research.

This article is structured as follows. The following section discusses the literature on party digitalization and public perceptions to highlight the existing knowledge on the topic. The third section outlines the research design and case selection, arguing for the suitability of focusing on Bulgaria in the 2020-2022 period and the use of narrative and thematic analysis for studying media narratives on party digitalization. Section four summarises the results of the study, while the final section concludes the article and situates the findings in the existing literature with a look towards future works.

Party digitalization and media narratives

The development of new information and communication technologies had a significant impact on political party work. Such technologies enabled political parties not only to improve their communication with the electorate, mobilise supporters and gain popularity (Lilleker et al., 2011; Kalsnes, 2016), but also to engage their members and streamline internal communication in a more efficient and focused way than existing channels allow (Oross and Gherghina, 2023; Oross and Tap, 2023). This can be achieved through the adoption and use of said information and communication technologies by political parties, the process of which is known as party digitalization. Existing works focus predominantly on the use of social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube (Jacobs and Spierings, 2016; Woolley and Howard, 2019), as such platforms allow parties to conduct both their internal work and external engagement. Nevertheless, research increasingly recognise the use of other tools as well, some of which date even further back than social media. These may include the use of emails, party websites, online forums and newsletters (Cunha and Voerman, 2007), while in more recent times there is a growing experience with party-specific apps and/or platforms, such as NationBuilder, specifically developed for party work that incorporates and centralises most of the elements of existing online tools (McKelvey and Piebiak, 2018).

The political parties in Central and Eastern Europe are rather late adopters of online tools although some election campaigns were organized extensively online in the last decade (Marian, 2018). As they have less experience in political work than their West European counterparts due to the more recent transition to democracy in the region, political parties in CEE were rather cautious in digitizing their work (Surowiec and Štětka, 2018). This stems to a large extent from their organisational features: the majorities of political parties in CEE are centralised and personalised organisations around the figure of the party leader and their close circle of associates (van Biezen, 2003; Gherghina, 2014; Gherghina and Soare, 2021), whereas their memberships are rather limited and rather passive outside electoral campaigns (Hloušek and Kopeček, 2016). In such circumstances party digitalization has been largely a top-down endeavour, where parties control the flow of content and monitor incoming inquiries (Oross and Tap, 2023). The response by party members, however, seems positive: younger parties and younger members are more prone to digitize their party work as it spreads the party message quickly despite recognised concerns on the inequalities of

online access, the nature of online discussions, as well as the lasting influence of more traditional means of communication, such as phone calls, party meetings or reliance on traditional media for spreading the party message (Jacuński, 2018). These are all important insights that lay out the background of party digitalization: the extent to which and the ways parties in Central and Eastern Europe digitized their work, the reasons for their adaptation and the perceptions of party members and activists on it. What is missing here is what the wider public thinks of party digitalization.

This is an important question for two main reasons. First, contemporary societies are well-ingrained on the Internet, as many aspects of modern life can be steered online (Bakardjieva, 2005). In this respect, people encounter party activities online be that direct party messages or indirect reports on their deeds coming from a range of sources, ranging from established media outlets to random Internet users. Therefore, people may form their opinion on party digitalization through their own experiences of encountering party digitalization. Second, party-society relations currently develop on the one hand towards an increased detachment of parties from society (Katz and Mair, 1995; Mair, 2013), while simultaneously the wider public becomes increasingly apathetic towards democracy (Dalton, 2013). In these circumstances party digitalization may narrow the gap between parties and society as people may be exposed to party activities more frequently than in the past, and, thus, recognise the ways and extent parties engage with the public. Simultaneously, parties would be able to engage more often with society and thus receive constant feedback on its actions. The existing literature paid very little attention to public perceptions on party digitalization. The few works that touch upon the topic focus predominantly on party members, activists, or candidates i.e. people who are well-involved in political and party work (Ward, Lusoli and Gibson, 2003; Jacuński, 2018). While their insights are important, we know that they do not necessarily represent the views of the wider public, as these groups are noticeably more interested or active in politics than society in general (Sandri and Seddone, 2015). In order to understand what party digitalization means for party-society relations and for democracy as a whole, however, we need to cast a wider net and look into the perceptions the wider public has on this topic.

An important element of the public perceptions concerns media narratives and the role of the media in modern society. Mass media is a significant social and civic institution that serves as both vehicle and actor in party-society relations. On the one hand, parties

require media to spread party messages to the wider public, while on the other hand, people need media to report on party activities and, thus, keep the public informed about them. Furthermore, the media can serve as an important actor, which can hold parties to account by posing questions of public interest. It can also influence the public opinion on a topic (Protest and McCombs, 1991), as the rich literature on political communication demonstrates. Less pronounced, but similarly important is also the representative function of media. Parties may be informed on public concerns through the media and, thus, the media can be representative of these concerns (McCombs, 2014). Similarly, any member within and outside a particular community can gain an understanding of public concerns or debates on a topic through the media. In short, media can be a mirror of the public, while it can influence the public as well.

Because of this representative function media narratives can provide important insight on public perceptions on party digitalization. There is little literature on media narratives on party digitalization, so the following discussion on potential media narratives, and, thus, public perceptions derive from the existing studies on party digitalization as a whole. Based on there, there are three key elements that we may expect that media narratives would address. The first of those stems from normative discussions on the effects of digitalization. These works reveal that party digitalization may have two conflicting outcomes: it can either reduce existing differences between political parties offline ("equalisation") or it can further deepen these differences by translating them online ("normalisation") (Gibson and McAllister, 2015). This understanding echoes similar findings in other areas, including mass media, that view digitalization as "emancipatory" i.e. providing opportunities for a broader engagement from previously silent groups as opposed to "hegemonic" i.e. deepening the existing social inequalities that favour particular groups (Miranda, Young and Yetgin, 2016). This stems from an implicit understanding that the online world represents a new arena, an impartial stage where parties compete, can spread their message and engage with society. Hence, in terms of media narratives on party digitalization we may expect that there would be an assessment on its effects on party-society relations. Translating the existing debates of digitalization on potential media narratives we may expect that the media would either see parties' adoption and use of online tools as narrowing the gap between them and society or as extending the existing distance.

Second, the literature on the effects of digitalization reveals also the noticeable, yet changing professionalisation of using online tools (Steffan and Venema, 2020; Mykkänen, Nord and Moring, 2022) and the rapid development and distinction of conventional and unconventional methods of using online tools by political parties (Peña, 2021). While it is not the purpose of this article to look into the ways parties use online tools, it should be noted that their use may have an impact on media narratives. Often such tools are an official and most immediate source for media (and wider society) to contact a party. Therefore, the ways in which parties use online tools may influence public perceptions on them. In this respect, the growing professionalisation associated with party digitalization can be recognised by the media, and, hence, we may expect that the media would view party digitalization as a sign of parties' efforts to make themselves more accessible to the public. Nevertheless, a professionalization can go along with different approaches to using social media, be that conventional, where parties rely on the existing netiquette and functions that online tools offer to political parties, or unconventional, where parties can be either innovative and/or unusual in their use of online tools (Peña, 2021). In such circumstances both main kinds of media narratives can be present: the media can either view the use of online tools by parties as professional or unprofessional depending on whether the parties' communication improves the relationship with the public. Similarly, a perceived conventional or unconventional use of online tools may be either drawing attention as it makes parties look accessible, or it may push people away as it may be perceived as an inappropriate approach towards public communication.

Third, another important strand of literature focuses on the reasons parties digitize their work. While the majority of studies focused on electoral campaigns (Baranowski et al., 2022) and on individual candidates (Metag and Marcinkowski, 2012), there is a growing number of works that pay particular attention on the party-level reasons of doing so (Bøggild and Pedersen, 2018). Existing knowledge reveals in this respect that it is the combination of structural (i.e. the environment in which competition takes place), strategic (the specifics of the competition) and individual factors (incumbency, race competitiveness, etc.) that motivate parties to digitize their work (Metag and Marcinkowski, 2012). This demonstrates that while there are certain objective factors associated with party resources and circumstances in which parties find themselves in, an important part of why and how parties adopt and use online tools depends also on their particular subjective choices. Such choices

may be determined by the organisational features of political parties (Oross and Tap, 2023), but also from their subjective strategic, tactical and/or ideological considerations (De Winter and Baudewyns, 2015; Cogels and Baudewyns, 2019).

This has some important implications on media narratives of party digitalization, which is important to explore. On the one hand, the media may see party digitalization as a depoliticized matter determined by the objective circumstances in which parties find themselves into. On the other hand, however the subjective influences on party choice may prompt people to consider party digitalization as a political matter associated with demonstrating the party ideology and positions in practice. We know certainly that such perceptions exist when it comes to what party activities parties do (Barberá et al., 2019) or how they organise themselves (Bale, Webb and Poletti, 2019), so certainly, there may be a similar perception here too. The implications in this respect would be that the use of online tools by parties is not a neutral matter but it is rather yet another tool for parties in their ideological competition.

Research design

This research will focus on the case of Bulgaria to explore media narratives of party digitalization. The country is a standard case of party digitalization in Central and Eastern Europe. The main political parties in the country remained rather cautious in adopting new technologies, while they increasingly rely on them for their party work (Metodieva, 2014). Furthermore, Bulgaria is a relatively young democracy, which currently faces a gradual process of democratic backsliding (Dawson and Hanley, 2016). Therefore, the insights of this case can be indicative of the process of party digitalization in circumstances where parties have a comparatively limited experience with organisational work and/or democracy faces noticeable challenges. This would be helpful particularly for comparisons with electoral democracies in Central and Eastern Europe and in other regions of the world. The chosen timeframe of study is between 1 January 2020 and 31 December 2022. This three-year period was very eventful for Bulgaria. It includes the entire period of Covid-19 pandemic as well as initial ten months of war in Ukraine; a development that occurs in close proximity to the Bulgarian borders. While party digitalization in the country dates back much earlier than the said period (Metodieva, 2014), the pandemic conditions of social distancing required from the parties to rely extensively and intensively on online tools for their daily work (Spirova,

2022), which the media should notice and perceive. Politically, the 2020-2022 period was one of crisis in Bulgaria: following mass anti-government protests in the summer of 2020, the country held four parliamentary elections in 2021 and 2022, as government coalitions proved unstable (Bankov, 2023). In this intensive period of permanent campaign, the party activities, including their use of online tools, received a heightened public attention.

The analysis of this article stems from the study of media reports on party digitalization in the said period. Bulgarian media is consumed regularly by Bulgarian society with noticeable preferences for TV as main offline and online sources of information, while traditional newspapers become increasingly present and consumed online (Antonov, 2022). The media landscape in Bulgaria is characterised with a strong concentration of ownership within a handful of owners, some of which remain in close proximity to the main political parties in the country and use their outlets as a leverage to gain political and economic benefits (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; Raycheva, 2017). As a result, media freedom in Bulgaria is significantly low (Price, 2019) with the country currently (as of 2022) standing on 91st place out of 180 countries in the Media Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders (Reporters Without Borders, 2019). Hence, the insights from this analysis should be taken not only as a reflection of public perceptions, but also of the media brokers that are entangled in the country's politics.

The analysis is done the following way. First, relevant articles were identified. These came from the news websites of the Bulgarian National Television, bTV, Nova TV, the Bulgarian National Radio, Darik Radio, as well as the websites of Dnevnik, Kapital, Sega, Duma, 24 Chasa, Trud, Mediapool, Focus News, Offnews, Deutsche Welle Bulgaria, Radio Free Europe Bulgaria. This extensive list includes the three main television channels and two main radio stations in Bulgaria, as well as the most read online and traditional media in the country. They cover a wide range of ideological positions and also are representative of the different relationships between Bulgaria media outlets and political parties in the country, as some of them are more pronounced in their support or opposition to the government of the day. Hence, this list of Bulgarian media ensures that an overwhelming majority of the Bulgarian public would have encountered some of the varying narratives presented in them. More importantly, this wide list ensures that the main narrative(s) would be comprehensively captured.

The articles were found through an online search in the respective websites of the media outlets, listed above, using the combination between any of the keywords “digital”, “online”, “electronic”, “social media” and the name of a political party or the general term “party”/“parties” or “political party”/“political parties”. The parties included in the analysis are all nine political parties that entered at least one of the four parliaments, elected in 2021 and 2022. These included the centre-right Citizen for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), the centre-left Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the liberal centrist representative of the large Turkish minority Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), the liberal right alliance Democratic Bulgaria (DB), the liberal centrist We Continue the Change (PP), the populist There is Such a People (ITN), the left-wing alliance Stand Up! Thugs Out! (ISMV), the radical right Revival, and the national conservative Bulgaria Rise (BV). As these parties captured more than 90% of the support on each election, they represent the main actors of the Bulgarian political system, whose activities (online and offline) had been of main interest and concern from the Bulgarian media.

Following a check of the articles for false positives, they were grouped into themes depending on the article content. A theme should include at least 15 articles from at least three sources to ensure that themes received a noticeable attention from at least a part of the Bulgarian media landscape. Based on the identified themes, the analysis conducts a narrative analysis looking at the connections between the themes in order to present a coherent narrative that the Bulgarian media provides on party digitalization. While typically narrative analyses are concerned with a sequence of interconnected events (Franzosi, 1998), this is not truly possible in this respect as the topic of party digitalization does not have a clear timeline of events that occurred in the studied 2020-2022 period. Instead, the narrative analysis is concerned with the social and political developments that Bulgarian media associates with party digitalization and its assessment of them. In doing so, the analysis is focused on the structure of the narrative (Franzosi, 1998) i.e. whether party digitalization is embedded of a broader media narrative and, if so, what this narrative is. This would not only highlight the media perception on party digitalization, but it would also place it in the broader public debates that occur in Bulgarian society.

Analysis

Media narratives on party digitalization in Bulgaria focus mainly on the external relations of political parties with wider society. Particular attention in this respect receives the use of social media by the political parties. The studied period highlights three key topics in this respect. First, party digitalization has been linked to the topic of disinformation and misinformation. A significant number of articles focuses on the parties' role for the general spread of fake news and the use of troll farms to sway public opinion in social media. Particular attention receives the work of anti-political establishment parties, namely Revival, who gained a significant traction on Facebook as the posts of its leader, Kostadin Kostadinov, regularly topped the engagement rankings (Trud Online, 2022b). While other politicians' and parties' behaviour is also explored, it is Revival's strong presence in social media that is regularly linked by the media to the use of fake news and troll farms in spreading their message. The former has been particularly prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic when Revival took an outspoken sceptical stance towards lockdown measures and vaccinations (Paunova, 2021). Related to this was the media attention Revival received around their online organising of anti-lockdown protests (Svobodna Evropa, 2020) and their use of social media to frame the protests as a popular insurgency that receives a heavy crackdown from the state (Euractiv.bg, 2022). The latter relates to the uncontrolled spread of Revival's narratives across Facebook groups that challenge Bulgaria's political and economic system, as well as its geopolitical orientation. In this respect, Revival's behaviour has been perceived by the media as well-organised and focused (Zapryanov, 2022), while also with dubious sources. Common narratives in this respect relate this use to Russian disinformation campaigns (Lateva, 2022), as there are noticeable suspicion that Revival and Kostadinov personally receive Russian funding (Stoynev, 2022) given the rapid increase of the party activities within a short period of time, which occurred with the help of money that goes beyond its state subsidy (Spasov, 2022). More importantly, the party stances mirror either official Russian state discourses or popular Russian discourses, which prompts Bulgarian media to link the party digitalization of Revival (or at least its external activities) to Russian disinformation efforts around the globe (Angelov, 2022; Trud News, 2023). These narratives were further strengthened by the revelations of one former Revival MP that the party uses troll farms online to amplify its message (Genchev, 2022), which was heavily covered by the Bulgarian media.

A second major topic related to the social media activities of Bulgarian parties concerns party spending and funding for digital communication. The four elections that occurred in 2021 and 2022 were a source for regular auditing of the amount of money political parties invested in paid ads, particularly on Facebook (Mediapool.bg, 2022a). Beyond the case of Revival, Bulgarian media pays close attention also to more established or moderate parties as well. In this respect, the Bulgarian media frames spending as a matter of electoral success, as the main bulk of articles in this topic reports on the ratio between official spending for online advertisement and the number of votes parties have received (Boulevard Bulgaria, 2022). Here, the Bulgarian media are rather sceptical towards party digitalization. Reports regularly note that the liberal right Democratic Bulgaria (DB) and the centrist liberal We Continue the Change (PP) invest significant amounts of money into paid ads without significant improvement in their electoral results (Boulevard Bulgaria, 2022). Similarly, some Bulgarian media outlets revealed that Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) also invests noticeably into paid ads without seeking electoral advantages: for example, noticeable media attention received the criticism of the Bulgarian PM Kiril Petkov that the GERB youth organization invested significant sums of money in paid ads to stoke public concerns regarding the rising fuel prices (segabg.com, 2022). Overall, it seems that to Bulgarian media conventional electoral campaigns rather fail to mobilise people, whereas negative ones are more influential, considering the examples of Revival above or GERB here.

The third main topic within the media narratives on the social media activities of Bulgarian parties focuses on the effects of using social media for party communication. In this respect, the Bulgarian media recognises that social media reduced the distance between parties and society, as it provided a direct channel for communication for both. As parties rely on social media to spread their message and inform the public about events, their activities receive much more attention and scrutiny. For example, the PP and DB regularly posted videos of their campaign activities across Bulgaria in an effort to demonstrate their presence in society and, thus, challenge the narrative of them being distant from the problems of the common man. Nevertheless, the Bulgarian media notes that parties still try to control their engagement with society. Particularly, the Bulgarian media recognise that the direct channel between parties and public removes traditional media as the middle person. This has been problematised in the media narrative, as parties are seen as

organisations that use social media to avoid being asked tough questions and, thus, limit public accountability. Two cases were particularly emphasised in this respect. First, GERB and their party president, Boyko Borisov, became infamous for their use of social media in a controlled way. In 2020 Borisov's regular visits at the sites of major infrastructural projects of his government or his drives in his SUV where he comments on these visits received much public attention while also being criticised that he avoids public scrutiny (Slatinski, 2020). This has been further strengthened in the period of the electoral campaigns, where Borisov has been seen regularly socialising in crowds, comprised mainly of his supporters, while avoiding facing any journalistic questions (Milcheva, 2021).

A much more pronounced avoidance of media scrutiny comes from ITN. The populist party can rely on the support of 7/8 TV, founded and run by its party leader, Slavi Trifonov, where he and some of the key figures of his party have regular shows, which are used to spread the party message. On social media the party avoids any significant public engagement, while also keeping a veneer of transparency. For example, all regional party branches have their Facebook group and are publicly accessible for non-members. Slavi Trifonov's page regularly posts comments on political and social developments, which attract significant number of responses and are regularly reported by the media (bTV Novinite, 2021). Nevertheless, Trifonov and most of his members rarely faced direct journalistic questions outside of their media. Overall, the narrative of Bulgarian media in this respect is that party digitalization in fact aids parties to avoid public scrutiny while also creating the impression of being closer to the people.

Moving away from external communication, the Bulgarian media paid little attention on party digitalization as an internal party matter. While prior to the studied period, the main exception was the internal elections of Yes, Bulgaria, a constituent party of the Democratic Bulgaria alliance, to determine their candidate list for the 2019 European parliament elections (Bulgarian National Radio, 2019), since 2020 only one more case received some media attention and was, thus, part of the media narrative of party digitalization. This concerned the internal decision-making process of the Bulgarian Socialist Party. As the COVID-19 pandemic established strict distancing measures, party meetings were held either online or indirectly per email. At the same time BSP were in the middle of a major internal battle for control of the party. In this respect, media reports regularly reported on complaints of opponents of the party president, Korneliya Ninova, of her practice to request the

approval of party decisions by the party executive without prior discussion (Klisurova, 2020). Instead, the decision is circulated to members of the executive via email with the request to sign and confirm it – something Ninova’s opponents find as undemocratic (Barikada, 2022). In this respect, the media narratives strengthened their point that party digitalization is a tool for parties (or at least their leaders) to circumvent scrutiny and discussion.

Beyond using social media, party digitalization has been reflected by the Bulgarian media as means to mobilise supporters and promote party policy. In this respect media narratives emphasise the role of party digitalization in parties’ efforts to uphold and strengthen the country's democracy. A major example in this respect that received noticeable media attention was the case of You Count, an initiative by Democratic Bulgaria, to have electoral observes across all polling stations in the country and abroad to ensure that ballot counts are done in accordance with the law. The campaign was officially non-partisan, but nevertheless it was DB which mainly advocated for it, which prompted Bulgarian media to see it as an extension of DB’s support for rapid and fundamental political reforms to fight against corruption (Offnews.bg, 2023). Interestingly, however, the campaign and its website became an important point of reference for Bulgarian media outlets when it comes to the timely upload of electoral results, as often volunteers were able to report much quicker the outcomes of the counts than polling stations themselves. In this respect, the campaign relied heavily on digital tools to maintain and deliver its monitoring: something that media outlets recognise as an important factor in its success to recruit volunteers and promptly do its work (economy.bg, 2021). Hence, in this case party digitalization is being presented as a party vehicle to expand their activities and to provide important public service for civil society.

This media narrative of party digitalization as party tool has been mostly strengthened by the close association of party digitalization with the topic of machine and electronic voting. The introduction of machine voting has been long debated in Bulgarian politics with key arguments in its favour being ensuring transparency and convenience of the electoral process, the limitation of clientelist electoral practices (particularly, the so called controlled vote where people need to provide proof for their vote in order to receive money), the reduction of invalid ballots, as well as prompt and accurate processing of electoral documents and data (Todorov, 2022). While a referendum in 2015 demonstrated an overwhelming public support for machine and electronic voting (Stoychev, 2015), the idea faced significant resistance by the more established political parties, particularly GERB and

DPS, unofficially because of their reliance on clientelist mobilisation practices, while officially due to concerns for the safety, security, and anonymity of the vote (epicenter.bg, 2022). Nevertheless, machine voting has been incrementally introduced in 2017 despite major debates on the public procurement procedure for delivering the voting machines and software (Mediapool.bg, 2022b).

Only in 2021 a loose coalition of parties, including DB, PP, ITN, and ISMV, which included machine voting in their electoral manifestos as one of the many measures to improve the quality of democracy in the country, managed to pass a change in the election code introducing widespread machine voting while removing the paper ballot (Svobodna Evropa, 2021). Coincidentally, those parties were also the ones that the Bulgarian media sees as being at the forefront of party digitalization in their use of new technologies in their political campaigns and overall activities (Mediapool.bg, 2020). This has been further amplified by the support particularly from DB and PP for a rapid digitalization of government institutions and procedures, particularly concerning providing public services and engaging with citizens. Hence, party digitalization, e-governance, and machine voting has been successfully merged into interconnected topics by the Bulgarian media given that all three were practiced and advocated by the same parties.

Given that the said parties supported the introduction of e-governance and machine voting with arguments of anti-corruption and transparency, party digitalization has been presented by the Bulgarian media as yet another tool for those parties to promote these policies by demonstrating its virtues through internal party work and engagement with wider society. In doing so, the topic of party digitalization has been successfully politicized by Bulgarian media in the simplistic divide where a party that heavily use social media is among the so called “digital parties” interested in ensuring transparency and anti-corruption through modern technology. This includes even Revival, which despite its attempts to introduce a temporary parliamentary commission on investigating machine voting and voter irregularities (Iliev, 2021), is not opposed in principle to machine voting for similar arguments as the liberal parties (Trud Online, 2022a).

The culmination of the politicization of party digitalization in the media narratives came in late 2022 during the debates on the changes of the electoral code. In them the more established parties GERB, DPS, and BSP successfully managed to water down the use of machine voting, while also reintroduced the use of paper ballots (Iliev, 2022). Under the guise

of continued concerns of the safety and security of the voting process, as well as concerns of more senior voters of not knowing how to use the machines, these three parties managed to restore their clientelist practices, which limited their support in the 2021 and 2022 elections. This quickly led to the media monicker of the “paper coalition” for the three parties due to their staunch support for the use of paper ballots (Kanev, 2022). The main opposition to these parties were branded even by their opponents as the so called “digital parties” (Nikolova, 2023), comprised of the parties advocating for improved transparency and strong anti-corruption efforts. Interestingly, this divide between “paper” and “digital” parties brings somewhat confusion among the Bulgarian media, as it does not go neatly along the corruption/anti-corruption lines. This particularly concerns the case of Revival, which – as discussed in more detail above – is very active online, does not oppose machine voting in principle, but nevertheless is at odds with the main ideological and policy positions of the other “digital” parties that tend to support more centrist and liberal positions (Smilov, 2023). Nevertheless, the divide between “paper” and “digital” parties seems to deepen the political polarization in Bulgaria, as it is promptly imbedded in existing political debates. More importantly, it implicitly suggests that party digitalization is one of the means which parties use to advocate for policies that challenge the status-quo and demand a fundamental reform towards more public transparency and anti-corruption.

Conclusions

The analysis on media narratives on party digitalization in Bulgaria reveal two major elements. First, the topic has been mainly associated with the parties’ engagement with users on social media and, thus, their activities were associated with broader debates on the spread of misinformation and disinformation, Russian online influence, as well as party-society relations. In terms of the latter debate, media narratives suggest that party digitalization enables parties to make their control over their communication with the public stronger, as they can easily evade challenging questions or topics, while maintaining a veneer of openness and transparency. Second, the topic of party digitalization has been viewed by the media as a part of ongoing political debates. As some parties advocate for technological solutions to prevent and limit corruption, the Bulgarian media views party digitalization as an important aspect of these parties’ advocacy by demonstrating the usefulness and benefits of online tools in favour of improved transparency and prompt provisions of service.

While these findings are based on a narrative analysis of a single-case study, which limits any potential generalisations, they point towards important theoretical and empirical considerations. First, the findings suggest that party digitalization should be perceived not just as a process that parties go through, but as an important element of their organisational strategies towards mobilising supporters, broadening their appeal, and developing and advocating policies. Therefore, digitalization represents an important tool within a broader context, and, therefore, its effects and origins should be considered with this background in mind. Second, party digitalization is not immune of broader online trends. While methodologically we may try to separate it from such dynamics, we should acknowledge that the adoption and use of online tools follows the broader logic of online communication and, hence, our analysis should be aware of it. Third, the politicization of party digitalization seems to highlight the challenges it may face in polarized societies or in electoral democracies that strive to strengthen their institutions. As with the first point, party digitalization is not a neutral process but can be used as a party activity that makes internal and external signals and, hence, the way it occurs may be very much shaped by this politicized character rather than the more objective elements associated with party resources.

Future works on party digitalization in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond may look more closer on the relationship between party digitalization and broader online trends, such as the spread of fake news or the communication trajectories between political institutions and wider society. Another important topic that needs to be explored is the politicization of party digitalization and its integration within broader political debates. To what extent is this politicization also reflected in public opinion and what are the effects of it on quality of democracy are among the questions that could be addressed in subsequent works. Beyond this more comparative work on the public perceptions and media narratives on party digitalization within and outside Central and Eastern Europe needs to be done in order to gain a better understanding of the topic.

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