

FACEBOOK USAGE BY MAYORS IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

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ABSTRACT *The ever increasing rise of social media network users consequently leaves a mark on political communication. While social media tools are already adopted in political marketing, primarily in election campaigning, governments are still new in using social media. The aim of this study is to examine how Facebook is used by city mayors in countries of Central and Southeastern Europe in two months period, from March 1st to April 30th of 2012. Using content analysis we first analyzed status messages in order to see what kind of status messages they post: personal or political. Secondly, we conducted an analysis of comments on the examined statuses, in order to examine if citizens make constructive, cynical, supportive or neutral comments. We examined ten city mayors' Facebook pages in five countries, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Macedonia and Slovenia. The results have revealed that city mayors in Central and Southeastern Europe use Facebook almost exclusively for official purposes. Secondly, the analysis of citizens' comments demonstrates that expressing cynicism on Facebook is not the trend in these countries. The findings further confirm that Facebook is a good platform for gathering supporters, while there were no strong evidence found that it serves as platform for constructive discussion. The paper finally discusses how politician's status messages can engage a larger number of citizens.*

KEY WORDS

E-DEMOCRACY, FACEBOOK, ONLINE ENGAGEMENT, LOCAL GOVERNANCE, SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS

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INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, the importance of social media in everyday life became unquestionable and we are free to say that its' importance in the next years will only grow. Sites such as Facebook.com are the best example of the phenomenal growth social network sites have seen in recent years. Facebook was launched in 2004. In May 2013 it had more than one billion active monthly users¹. With the increase in popularity of social network sites, the potential for individuals to engage in online discussion increased as well. Citizens realized they finally had a platform where they can express their opinion and be sure that what they say will reach others. Meaning that your opinion is no longer trapped in your living room reaching only your family or in a bar reaching only your friends. Bearing this in mind, we wanted to see how this trend is reflected in the sphere of politics. We wanted to see how politicians present themselves on Facebook and how citizens act in response. While most of the research on this topic comes from western European countries and the United States (Chadwick, 2006; Papacharissi, 2009), little is known about the Facebook usage of politicians in Central and Southeastern Europe. Due to this notion and to the fact that little is known about political discourse on Facebook in general, the novelty of this study is unquestionable. In this study we shall be looking to new media as an outlet for the city mayors' rhetoric and a hub for citizens' responses. When looking at governmental rhetoric, the research focuses on the rhetoric of ten city mayors in five countries: Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Republic of Macedonia and Bulgaria. The main point for citizens' response analysis is the citizens who are active online and who have commented at least once.

The study relies on literature on deliberative democracy. We share Stephen Coleman's (2003) beliefs that the new ICTs could contribute to a renewed faith in government bodies through the creation of a more transparent, interactive government engaged in wide dialogue with an interactive citizenry. We argue that citizens are willing to engage online if they have a platform for doing this. The issues raised by the city mayors in new media are assumed to be the issues the local government intends to communicate to the wider public, thereby putting them on the public agenda, engendering a more diverse discussion of them. Conducting content analysis we tried to find out how city mayors present themselves and how citizens respond to them. Relying on the literature about the personalization of politics (Norris, 2001; Van Zoonen, 2006; Corner and Pels, 2003), we coded status messages as personal and official, in order to see if the city mayors are using private issues to engage citizens. Furthermore, citizen's comments were coded as constructive, cynical, supportive and neutral.

Role of the Internet in politics

The growth of the internet and possible implications it might have for democracy and addressing interactivity as the key element led authors to explore possible changes in the nature of citizens' participation in politics and public life in general, believing that the

¹ <http://newsroom.fb.com/Key-Facts> (13.05.2013).

Internet has the potential to restore the deteriorating public sphere by providing a forum in which citizens debate issues of public concern, hold those in power accountable and improve the existing form of democracy (Coleman, 2004; Street, 2001). John Street finds that the internet may offer solutions for problems that have been obstructing political participation – “time, size, knowledge and access” (2001: 217). James Curran even refers to Nicholas Negroponte to suggest that these developments generate a new world order based on international communication and popular empowerment (Negroponte, 1996, in Curran, 2000: 137). All these arguments are suggesting that political websites should provide infrastructure for deliberation and that political participation will follow (Chadwick, 2006: 26).

Optimistic viewpoints about the possible role of the internet in politics are strongly stressing the strengthening of ties between the representatives and the represented, a two way communication with citizens in the role of strengthening democracy (Coleman, 2001) and not just a new technique of political spin. Furthermore, Coleman noted that the democratic deficit is facing many governments and that two key questions arise from that: “How to make the political process more participatory; and how can public engagement in policies that affect everyday life become more deliberative?” (Coleman, 2003: 11). Hence, Coleman believes that the new ICTs could contribute to a renewed faith in government bodies through the creation of a more transparent, interactive government engaged in wide dialogue with an interactive citizenry. Substantial literature speculates that the Internet could strengthen civic engagement and political activism, especially for many groups currently marginalized from mainstream politics (Norris, 2001). Pippa Norris summarizes: “...the Internet offers to reconnect people to the political process by helping people become more informed citizens, by helping representatives become more responsive to citizens, and by engaging more people in public policy debates” (Norris, 2001: 163).

Yet, these enthusiastic conceptions of the Internet face several problems. It has been argued that the ties that bind members of a virtual community are not as strong as the old ties of family, locality, religion, or even political structures like local party and lobby group associations. The Internet, in this view, takes the impersonality of the modern society to a new level, substituting a diluted form of community and social capital for the real things (Doheny-Farina, 1996, in Chadwick, 2006: 27). The argument basically comes down to Robert Putnam’s idea that the only functional community is the one based on face-to-face communication (1994, 1995). Besides, face-to-face interaction usually imposes the well-known demands of basic civility. Andrew Chadwick argues that the “removal of such discipline from the online environment makes it much easier to express all manner of other prejudices flourish online, where individuals can hide behind the cloak of anonymity or pseudonym, both widely accepted practices in cyberspace” (Chadwick, 2006: 27).

The potential of the internet to create free public spheres of political has simultaneously been criticized for the poor quality of interaction between individuals, as well as their tendency to produce a plurality of deeply segmented political associations. “Democracy

involves deliberation and dialogue in the formation of collective goals, rather than the aggregation of individual preferences” argues Street (2001: 219). And the Internet is all about registering individual preferences. This concern has been probably best articulated in Berry Wellman’s (2003, in Chadwick, 2006: 27) conception of the Internet as a “hybrid form of networked individualism”.

Furthermore, when criticizing the model of replacing the public sphere with the new media, some scholars stress that the traditional public sphere is characterized by objectivity, while the highly personalized content of and individual interaction with new media excludes objectivity (Paparachissi, 2009). A major implication of the personalized nature of the new media sphere is that it is not a distinct and separate space reserved for objective discourse; unlike the public sphere, the new media sphere mixes readily with commercialized space and with work and family life (ibid).

RESEARCH DESIGN AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Since 2008 and Obama’s election campaign Facebook become an inevitable part of political communication. Besides that, the fact that in May 2013 Facebook² had more than one billion monthly active users is something that not even one politician can ignore. Although a lot of research has already been done about new media and political communication, little is known about the discourse of politicians and citizens once they come together on some of these platforms. In order to find out more about the Facebook usage of politicians and citizens content analysis was used to analyze status messages and the discussion between city mayors and citizens.

A deductive approach to content analysis of citizens’ comments was applied meaning that the pilot analysis was conducted to predefine dominant categories which would be analyzed in the research. The results have revealed that the dominant categories are *cynical*, *constructive*, *supportive* and *neutral*. Status messages of city mayors were coded as *personal* and *political*, in order to see if the new media sphere is personalized when it comes to politics.

Thus, the main objective of this study is to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: What kind of status messages do politicians use on Facebook, personal or political?
- RQ2: How do individuals interact once they have come together in an online discussion forum, in this case a city mayor’s Facebook page or profile?

² <http://newsroom.fb.com/Key-Facts> (13.05.2013).

Methodology

Although discourse analysis could also be easily applied on this research, content analysis, as a methodology for “making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages” (Holsti, 1969: 14), was deemed more adequate to identify and quantify categories in which citizens’ comments appear and to identify and quantify the types of messages politicians use on Facebook.

Pilot analysis was conducted only to reveal the categories in which citizens’ comments appear, while for the Facebook status messages of mayors we immediately applied two categories: personal and political, where personal referred to private life or used private language, and political to all status messages concerning official things and using official language. The pilot analysis for citizens’ comments revealed four categories: cynical, constructive, supportive and neutral. We coded as cynical those comments which consisted: negative/cynical/insulting comments without any supporting arguments, generally negative comments without making any reference to the issue addressed, comments in which citizens expressed disbelief that the authorities are going to indeed implement the project/policy (Bebić et al, 2012: 49). We coded as constructive those comments which: directly referred to the certain issue/policy and made positive or negative comments with supporting arguments, contained alternative solutions or propositions with supporting arguments, provided an informed opinion and applicable solutions with the issue addressed (ibid). Supportive were those which contained messages of support, without expressing any opinion or giving any arguments, congratulating messages.

The definition of “cynical” and “constructive” comments did not assume the support or disagreement with the issue discussed. The support for or the disagreement to the issue or person did not present a relevant variable for the comment to be classified as cynical or constructive. For instance, comments about the issue could be negative but if they were well argued and contained alternative solutions they were classified as “constructive”. Likewise, comments about the issue could be positive but if contained cynical/insulting comments they were classified as “cynical”.

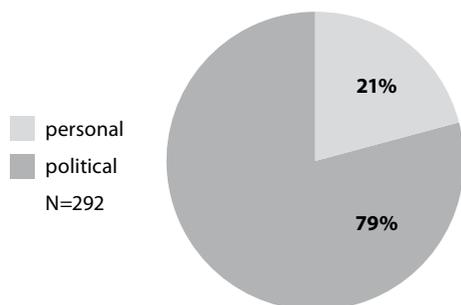
Using Holsti’s (1969) method for agreement, the inter-coder reliability test was conducted with two independent coders on 40 randomly chosen comments. The average reliability score across categories was assessed at 0.98.

● Sample

The analysis included ten city mayors from five countries from Central (Slovenia and Hungary) and Southeastern Europe (Croatia, Macedonia and Bulgaria). Initially we wanted to include all countries from Central and Southeastern Europe, but due to language and financial limitations, the study was made on a sample of five countries. Facebook pages of city mayors were chosen on the basis of their Facebook activity. For each country we did preliminary analysis and tested Facebook pages of city mayors in several largest cities. Final analysis included Facebook pages of the most active city mayors in selected countries. The total number of status messages coded was 292 and the total number of comments was 1,821. In order to get a relevant sample of status messages and citizens’ comments for each country, those were coded in March and April in 2012.

PRIVATE AND POLITICAL ON FACEBOOK BY CITY MAYORS IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

Drawing on the notion that politics has generally become more personalized in the last few decades, especially in the western democracies, our first research question tried to examine if this phenomenon is present in Central and Southeastern Europe in the context of new media, more precisely Facebook. Results demonstrate that among 292 status messages 21% referred to personal issues or used private language (Graph 1), which means that city mayors in these countries are still not keen to present themselves as humanized and “one of us” (Norris, 2003; Scammell, 2000). Furthermore, results show that in most cases city mayors use Facebook only as a clipboard for official announcements. This conclusion is confirmed with the notion that only four among the ten city mayors examined answer to the citizens who comment or post a question on their Facebook wall. Most of them just write a status message and do not answer on citizens’ comments and questions.



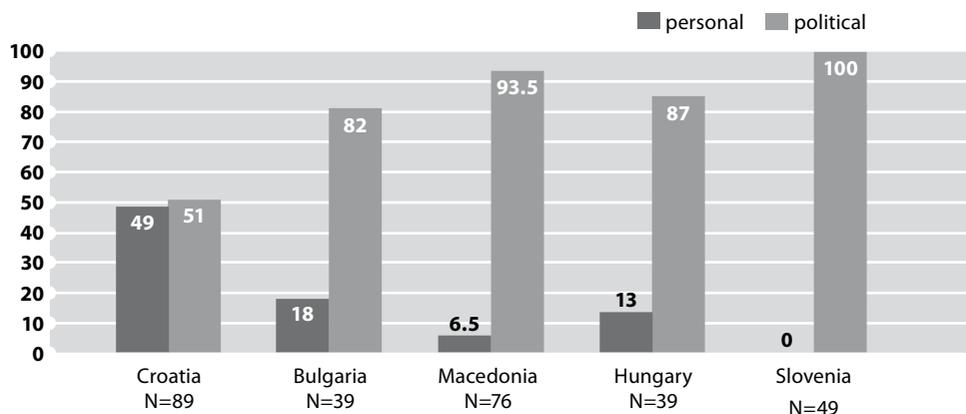
▲ Graph 1
Personal and political in status messages

However, Graph 2 demonstrates that this is not the case in Croatia, where 49% of all status messages were coded as personal. Furthermore, in Croatia we have examined three Facebook profiles of city mayors (mayors of Zagreb, Velika Gorica and Pula), and we have found that all of them interact with citizens on their walls, meaning that they were answering and commenting on comments and questions citizens post to them. The city mayor of Pula, Boris Miletić, for instance has an album named “Love” where he has photos with his wife. He is also keen to express how he feels, for instance on April 1, 2012, when a football match was interrupted because of flares, he wrote: “Sad and disappointed ...” On the other hand, 51% of all his status messages are political. Moreover, the interactivity on his wall is big, and it mostly concerns political issues. For instance, on April 17, 2012, he discussed the problem of traffic with one of his citizens, using only official language.

In Slovenia we examined the profile of Zoran Janković, the city mayor of Ljubljana. Preliminary analysis revealed that Janković was very active on Facebook only in March in 2012, when he ran the election campaign for city mayor, while in April and May in 2012 he posted only a few of status messages in total. An interesting finding is that during his campaign he did not have even one personal status message, all his messages (49

in total in March) concerned official announcements and referred to campaign activities. On March 23, he writes: "Today we are visiting Rožnik. During the weekend we have an action of cleaning our city. On Sunday get out and vote yes for a better city. Looking forward to seeing you on the polls, every vote is important!" Furthermore, while it would be expected to see the "humanized" part of him, photos of family etc., Janković never used any of these campaign tools on Facebook during his campaign. Similar results were found in Macedonia. Two examined city mayors Koce Trajanovski (Skopje) and Zoran Zaev (Strumica), had only 5 personal messages among 74 status messages in total.

In Hungary we examined two city mayors' profiles, and found that Tétényi Éva, the city mayor of Esztergom, used private status messages in 27% of cases (8 among 30 examined status messages). For instance, on April 9 she writes: "Yesterday evening I attended the Easter mass at the monastery. Today, I will take a rest and write my blog." The city mayor of Budapest posted only one private message in the examined time period in which he strongly stated his opinion about the resignation of the Hungarian president: "That person, who took trouble to investigate Pál Schmitt's doctoral dissertation after twenty-some years in order to harm him, should consider that he caused more harm to the country than to Pál Schmitt. It is not my intention to pass judgment whether Pál Schmitt should resign or not, because of the withdrawal of his doctorate. This is a very unpleasant situation. I do not have the motivation to prescribe when someone should resign and when not."



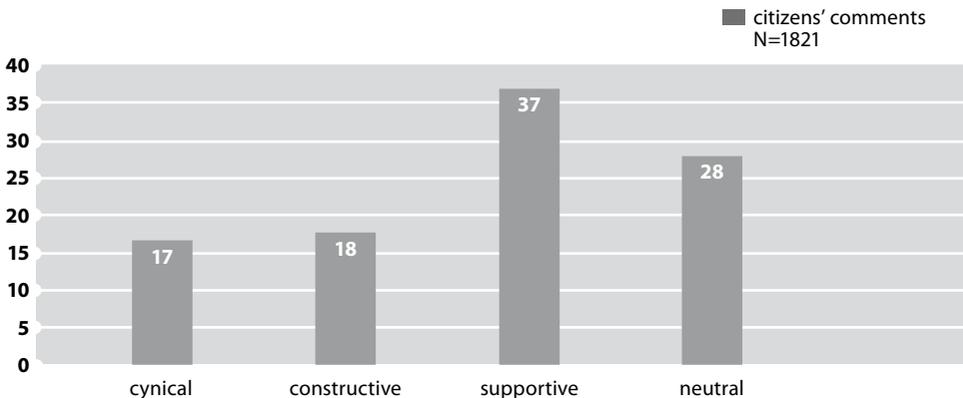
▲ Graph 2
Personal and political in status messages by countries

Surprising results were found in Bulgaria while doing the preliminary analysis to select the city for our research. More than 20 cities were examined for Facebook profiles or fan pages of city mayors, but only two mayors with active profiles were found, Dimitar Nikolov, the city mayor of Burgas and Ivan B. Totev, the city mayor of Plovdiv, while the mayor of Sofia did not have a profile on Facebook at the time the research was done. This was the

only examined country where the mayor of the capital did not have a Facebook page or profile. In 18% of cases the status messages of the examined city mayors in Bulgaria were personalized, while most of the messages referred only to political issues. Although Facebook penetration in Bulgaria (33.6 penetration rate)³, is on a high level, it seems that city mayors in this country are still not eager to engage on this platform with their citizens.

CITIZENS ON CITY MAYORS' FACEBOOK PAGES

Early optimistic viewpoints that internet is a new platform that will improve democracy, decrease distrust in politics, strengthen ties between the representatives and the represented (Coleman, 2001; Street, 2001), has been criticized at many points. One of the main critiques is that the internet is just another tool for expressing citizens' cynicism and distrust. This study questions this theory by analyzing comments that citizens post on the Facebook pages of city mayors in five Central and Southeastern European countries. Contrary to pessimistic views on citizens' engagement in new media, we have found that only 17% of all comments were categorized as cynical (Graph 3). Furthermore, 18% of all comments (331/1821) were categorized as constructive, which means that Facebook can serve as a platform for constructive and rational discussion. Supportive comments dominated with 37%. If we evoke Obama's campaign from 2008, it is not surprising that the trend of gathering supporters on social media is also present in Central and Southeastern Europe. Neutral comments have been found in 28% of cases.

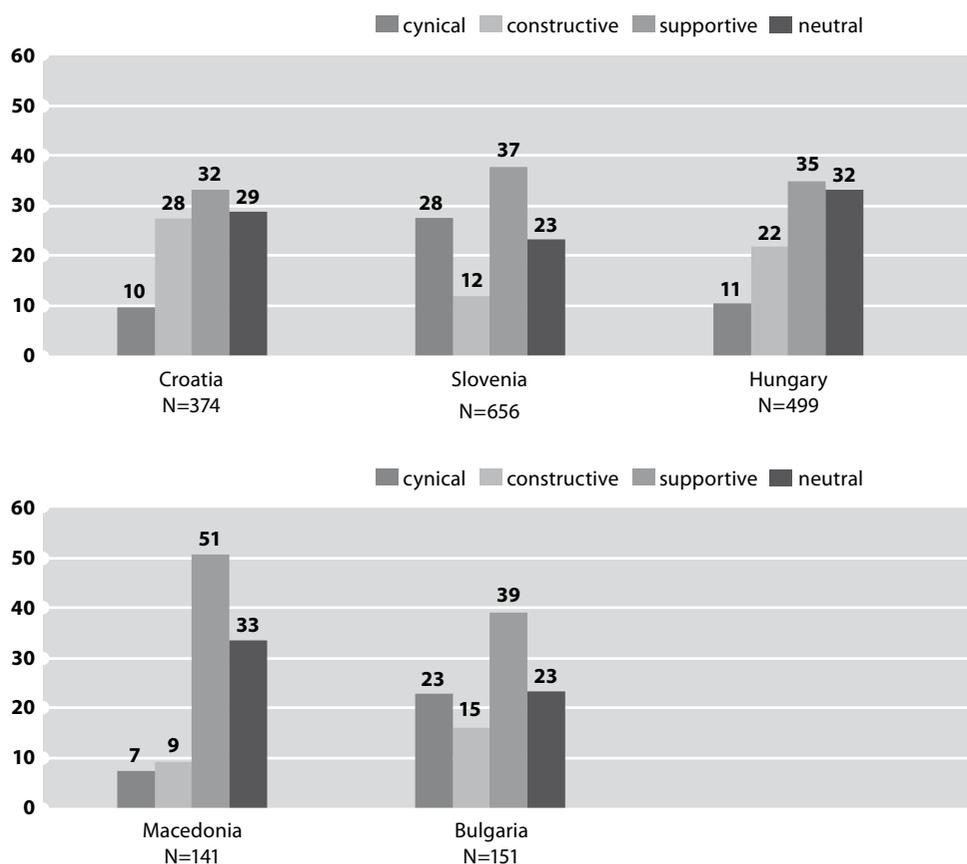


▲ Graph 3
Citizens' comments

Looking at the rate of cynicism in each country, we can see that in Croatia, Hungary and Macedonia, cynicism is low, moving in the range from 7 to 11%. In Slovenia 28% of all comments were cynical. However, as mentioned earlier the reasoning for a higher number of cynical comments could be in the elections, meaning that activity was higher

³ <http://www.internetworldstats.com/europa2.htm#mk> (13.05.2013).

which also resulted in a higher level of cynical comments. Another possible explanation for cynicism on Janković's Facebook page could be the fact that he was very active on Facebook only during the campaign. In the months prior to the campaign he was posting only a few times a month. It is easy to conclude that the citizens noticed this and punished him with cynical comments. A similar explanation could work for Bulgaria, where more than 23% of all comments were cynical. As already mentioned, in Bulgaria, the city mayors were the least active. The two examined profiles within the time period of one month for Nikolov and two months for Totev, had 39 status messages altogether. Due to this notion, it is not surprising that citizens do not feel as the mayors are part of the community, and once they come online, citizens treat them cynically.

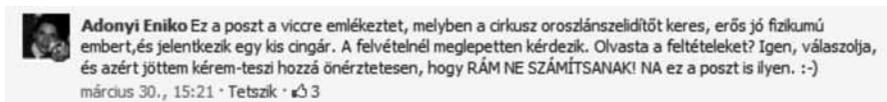


▲ Graph 4
Citizens' comments by countries

These are some examples of comments aimed at the mayor of Budapest István Tarlós:

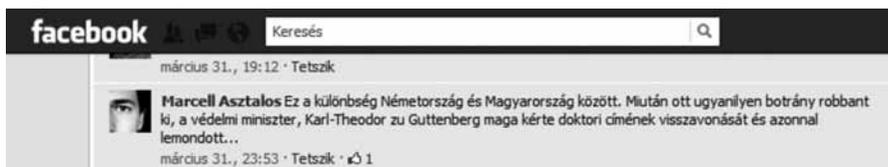
● **Cynical comment:**

"This comment reminds me of a joke in which a circus is looking for a lion trainer who is preferably a tall, strong man and a short, tiny guy applies for the job. He is asked: 'Have you read the preferred criteria for the job?' He answers in a somewhat proud manner: 'Yes, I have, and I am here to tell you that I am not in!' So this post is exactly like this."



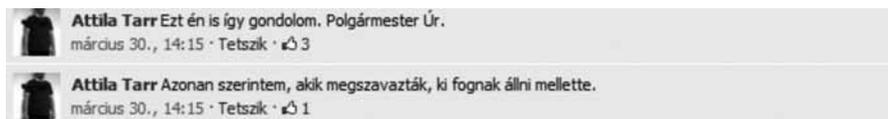
● **Constructive comment:**

"This is the difference between Germany and Hungary. There happened the same scandal, but secretary of defense Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg himself initiated the withdrawal of his own doctorate and then he resigned immediately."



● **Supportive comment:**

*"I agree, Mr. Mayor!"
"I think those who elected him will stick up for him."*



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This analysis provided several conclusions. In the first place we have seen that Facebook has become an important tool in political communication and that no longer can one ignore its' presence in the real world. Politicians realized they had to join the platform which became enormously popular in the last few years. Bearing in mind that Facebook penetration in Central and Southeastern countries is at a high level⁴, this is not surprising. They have obviously realized that it would be unwise to avoid a tool that enables them to reach thousands of their citizens, regardless of the risks it brings at the same time.

Furthermore, contrary to the conclusions of some scholars who argue that new media are a more personalized sphere (Papacharissi, 2009), we have found that only in 21% of

⁴ <http://www.internetworldstats.com/europa2.htm> (12.03. 2012).

cases the examined status messages of city mayors were personal, while most of the time they use Facebook as a bulletin-board for announcements of their political affairs. If we consider that trends in political communication are usually adopted from Anglo-Saxon democracies, it is only to be seen how social media will be used in politics in this part of Europe. Although, examining the trend of personalization of political communication on social media is way beyond the scope of this study, by looking only at status messages of city mayors, we can argue that this trend is still not present in Central and Southeastern Europe. However, as noted earlier, personalization of politics is too complex of a phenomenon to be discussed at this point.

Thirdly, looking at citizens' comments, we wanted to see how citizens communicate on city mayors' Facebook pages. In the first place we wanted to test the pessimistic theories which advocate the position that the internet will increase distrust and cynicism towards politics (Blumler, 1997; Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995). Our findings suggest that social media in this case were not used for expressing cynicism and distrust. Only 17% of all comments were cynical. Furthermore, 18% of all comments were categorized as constructive, meaning that Facebook has a potential for rational and constructive discussion. Some scholars argue that only well-structured and controlled discussion can be rational and constructive (Schudson, 1992: 156). However, our study revealed that citizens are able to be constructive and rational, even when they are not guided to do that. Lastly, most of the comments were supportive (37%) and neutral (28%). This was expected, if we remember Obama's campaign and how he used social media to gather supporters.

The potential of Facebook for political communication is huge. One just has to find the right way to use it, and that way is different for everyone. There is no single rule that will "work" on Facebook. Further research should try to find evidence of what kind of status messages engage more citizens and what is needed to get more constructive and supportive comments.

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KAKO GRADONAČELNICI U ZEMLJAMA SREDNJE I JUGOISTOČNE EUROPE KORISTE FACEBOOK

Milica Vučković :: Domagoj Bebić

SAŽETAK Sve veći broj korisnika društvenih mreža ostavio je trag i na političku komunikaciju. Dok je upotreba društvenih mreža u političkom marketingu već uvriježena, prvenstveno u izbornim kampanjama, vlade i lokalna uprava i samouprava još su uvijek na početcima korištenja društvenih mreža. Cilj je ovog istraživanja ispitati kako gradonačelnici u zemljama srednje i jugoistočne Europe koriste Facebook. Koristeći analizu sadržaja, ispitali smo kakve status-poruke gradonačelnici stavljaju na svoje službene Facebook-stranice – privatne ili službene. Osim toga, analizirali smo komentare građana kako bismo utvrdili ostavljaju li građani konstruktivne, cinične, neutralne ili komentare potpore na stranicama gradonačelnika. Ispitano je deset službenih Facebook-stranica gradonačelnika u pet zemalja: Bugarskoj, Hrvatskoj, Mađarskoj, Makedoniji i Sloveniji. Rezultati istraživanja pokazali su da gradonačelnici u navedenim zemljama koriste Facebook gotovo isključivo u službene svrhe. Analiza komentara građana ukazuje kako trend iskazivanja cinizma na Facebooku nije prisutan u zemljama srednje i jugoistočne Europe. Nalazi dalje upućuju na činjenicu da je Facebook dobra platforma za okupljanje simpatizera, ali nisu pronađeni dokazi da Facebook služi kao platforma za konstruktivnu raspravu.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

E-DEMOKRACIJA, FACEBOOK, ONLINE ANGAŽIRANOST, LOKALNA SAMOUPRAVA, DRUŠTVENE MREŽE, GRAĐANI

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