

THE ROLE OF TIKTOK IN SHAPING POLITICAL OUTCOMES DURING THE 2024 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS IN BULGARIA

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Abstract This article examines the role of TikTok in shaping political visibility and electoral competition during the 2024 European Parliament elections in Bulgaria. The study asks whether TikTok functions as a neutral campaign tool or whether its architecture structurally advantages particular types of political actors, especially populist and anti-establishment movements. Drawing on data collected within the CO3 research project, including over 40 hours of platform observation and 1,700+ recorded videos, the analysis explores patterns of content dissemination, user engagement, and narrative framing. The findings suggest that TikTok's algorithm prioritizes emotionally charged, personalized, and simplified content, which aligns closely with populist communication styles. As a result, outsider political actors can achieve high levels of visibility and rapidly build political relevance. The Bulgarian case demonstrates how TikTok facilitates the emergence of new political actors such as Velichie and MECH, which leveraged the platform to mobilize support despite minimal mainstream media presence. At the same time, the study highlights the limits of platform influence: TikTok does not directly determine electoral outcomes, and its effects are mediated by broader socio-political dynamics, including voter disengagement and party system volatility. Overall, the article argues that TikTok reshapes the logic of political competition by shifting legitimacy from institutional authority to platform affordances and visibility, thereby reinforcing anti-establishment narratives and transforming the democratic process.

Keywords TikTok, Bulgaria, EU parliament elections, political communication, polarization, political parties, populism, social media politics, algorithmic visibility

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Introduction

The emergence of social media platforms as influential actors in political communication has reshaped election dynamics worldwide. A number of studies in recent years have addressed the growing role of social media and how they were used for political purposes (Nahon, 2015; Ernst et al., 2017; Poell et al., 2019; Zhuravskaya, Petrova & Enikolopov, 2020; Herkman & Palonen, 2024).

The last European Parliament (EP) elections provide some very convincing evidence. The “Gen Z list” in Croatia led by social influencer Nina Skočak, used social networks like Instagram and TikTok to talk about the youth being unable to get affordable housing and the “pink tax” (Beslic, 2024), demonstrating that TikTok is a “*vehicle for personal narratives*” which provides opportunities for youth to express their concerns and frustrations on social and political issues that are important to them (Brown, Pini & Pavlidis, 2022). The Gen Z list finished in 6th place with 4.03% vote share, almost passing the electoral threshold for sending an MEP to Brussels. In Cyprus Fidias Panayiotou, a 24-year-old YouTuber and TikToker gained 19.4% of the vote without having any political experience and thus demonstrated that the expanded use of social media and unmediated communication, particularly with younger citizens, played a key role in creating a more personal and experiential form of communication during the election campaign (Katsourides, 2024). The effective use of TikTok by the far-right during the 2024 EP elections also showed the influence that social media exert in today’s politics (Barosso, Estevez & Mendez-Muros, 2025). The presidential elections in Romania also contributed to the understanding of how powerful political campaign tool TikTok can be. The Romanian case demonstrates how candidates can now successfully engage voters through decentralized digital media, bypassing traditional journalists and legacy news outlets (Gross & Schultz, 2025).

This article focuses on the role of TikTok in shaping electoral outcomes, not on social media generally. As mentioned above, TikTok reshapes political communication and thus political representation, but its role is still underinvestigated even though a growing number of studies address this phenomenon. The case of Bulgaria also provides some interesting insights on the role of TikTok in shaping political outcomes. Run together with the national parliament elections, EP elections in Bulgaria were overshadowed by the former. We are trying to answer the question: how do TikTok’s platform affordances shape the visibility and competitiveness of populist and anti-establishment actors during the 2024 Bulgarian elections? If digital platforms are equally accessible to all political actors, why do populist and anti-establishment actors appear particularly well positioned to thrive on TikTok? Does the platform merely serve as a neutral campaign tool, or do its affordances structurally privilege specific modes of political representation?

Our main argument is that TikTok is a particularly apt media platform for anti-establishment, far-right and populist political actors, especially in the case of the Bulgarian party system. The very character of this platform conveys very well the messages such players send to their audience, increasing their visibility and persuasiveness. First, TikTok content is characterised by directness, lack of filters and censorship, and a tendency to radicalisation (Mortenson, Nisbet & Garrett, 2026). It creates a perception that the viewers are present, almost involved in the conversation, and that they are not restrained by external or indeed internal factors and inhibitions (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). Secondly, there is a feeling of informality, which the platform is characterised by, informality which by itself goes against mainstream, institutionalised political actors, who have become part of the state and its institutions (Marwick, Pippert & Schnabel, 2025). Because of these two features – directness (lack of restraint) and informality – it could be argued that the media platform itself has become the message, a message which is anti-establishment and populist in its claim to direct representation of the people and their “true” preferences. We argue that this may be one of the reasons why far-right and anti-mainstream messages are spread very efficiently via TikTok and why they tend to infiltrate the feeds of mainstream audiences rather than vice versa.

By analyzing key campaign narratives on TikTok, user-generated content, and interaction trends on TikTok, our research aims to identify key patterns of engagement and tries to answer the question how social media are changing party politics and voter preferences. In doing so, we are using the database collected under the CO3 research project. This study contributes to the understanding of digital media’s influence on democratic participation in Eastern Europe. By using Bulgaria as a case study, we contribute to the growing body of literature on the TikTok influence on politics.

The article starts with a short review of the social media and politics literature, then introduces the case of Bulgaria, our methodology design and finishes with some observations, conclusions and a discussion.

Platform Affordances and Algorithmic Visibility

The Reuters Institute 2025’s “Digital News Report” highlights that the use of “traditional media sources such as TV, print, and news websites continue to fall, while dependence on social media, video platforms, and online aggregators grows” particularly among young people with 44% of people in the 18-24 age group across all countries in the survey stating they mainly use social networks as a news source. Furthermore, the report notes that “TikTok is the fastest growing social and video network” (Newman et al., 2025). The report indicates the growing role of the influencers in shaping public opinion. In conclusion, according to the Reuters Institute report, the short video format has become the dominant form of media content consumption. While primarily associated with TikTok, short-form video has been adopted in other social media (Youtube, Facebook, Instagram) as a form of information sharing. Some traditional media are implementing the short video format as well in an attempt to retain their audiences. We may observe a process of “TikTokization” (Schwarz, 2025; Wirz & Zai, 2025) whereby communication becomes shorter, more visual, more personalized, and more engagement-driven. However, the growing popularity of TikTok does not in itself explain its political significance. The central analytical question is not simply why TikTok is widely used, but why it

appears particularly adaptable to political instrumentalization to the extent that 2024 has been frequently described as the “TikTok election year” (Salter, 2024).

TikTok represents the synthesis of three powerful trends in social media: (1) the televisual medium that has always been the most broadly popular and powerful; (2) algorithmic recommendation that structures the user’s experience to a greater extent than any major social media platform to date and a (3) mobile-only interface designed to take advantage of a smartphone’s user-facing camera (Guinaudeau, Munger & Votta, 2022). Unlike platforms primarily organized around follower networks, TikTok’s “For You” feed is driven by algorithmic curation based on engagement metrics such as watch time, comments, and shares (Schwarz, 2025). Visibility, rather than prior social connection, becomes the central currency of relevance. There is a growing body of literature on TikTok algorithms (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Guinaudeau, Munger & Votta, 2022; Entrena-Serrano, 2025). Yet our focus in this paper is on socio-political effects and the outcome of the national and EP elections in Bulgaria 2024.

Recuero stresses on how “the platformization of online communication (...) shapes interaction” (Recuero, 2024). According to her, platforms prioritize visibility as a key value:

“To gain visibility, users may employ various tactics in their interactions, attempting to achieve virality. Humor, for instance, can be utilized as a strategy to amplify the visibility of violent discourses” (Recuero & Soares, 2013; Recuero, 2024).

In such an environment, legitimacy becomes increasingly derived from metrics of visibility (likes, shares, comments) rather than institutional authority or expertise and that’s particularly valid for TikTok as a social media platform. TikTok functions similarly to memes by creating a “shared cultural framework of cultivated senselessness”, which is used (predominantly) by young people to define themselves and their experiences in relation to the state of the world around them (Brown, Pini & Pavlidis, 2022). The influence of memes on the formation of political discourse through humor and ridicule is a phenomenon that has been well captured by recent research (Kulkarni, 2017; Penney, 2019; Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021). Memes disrupt and reimagine politics in humorous ways. Spreading across platforms, they confirm, contest and challenge political power and hierarchies (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021). The disruptive effect of using memes makes them effective while used by anti-establishment political actors, but they seem out of place when used by mainstream parties or national and European institutions. Through its visual representation and algorithms, TikTok amplifies the disruptive effect of the content it provides to its users.

Based on social identity theory, individuals who strongly identify with their political in-group are more likely to engage in political expression, driven by concern for issues affecting their group and a sense of shared fate with other members (Holbrook et al., 2016; Li, Cheng & Zuniga, 2025). While social identity has always played a role in politics, Törnberg, Anderson, Lindgren & Banisch (2021) suggest that we have entered a new regime where partisan identity comes to engulf and align other social identities. Political extremists, who often feel underrepresented in mainstream media, turn to social media to reinforce their identities and amplify their voices (Wasilewski, 2018; Li, Cheng & Zuniga, 2025). Another relevant theoretical perspective is the spiral of silence theory, which suggests that selective exposure

to ideological content shapes users' perceptions of the opinion climate. For example, exposure to liberal-leaning media has been associated with the perception that the broader opinion environment is more ideologically liberal (Tsfati et al., 2014). Similarly, on TikTok, users who perceive their political views as aligning with the dominant discourse, potentially reinforced by algorithmic filter bubbles, may feel more comfortable expressing their opinions (Li, Cheng & Zuniga, 2025). Consequently, electoral contests became less about policy debates and more about conflicts between newly emerging social groups distinguished by a fundamental sense of difference and stimulated not to interact with each other by staying isolated with like-minded people in echo chambers. The intensification of partisan identity has meant that partisan identity is coming to absorb a broader spectrum of social identities, thereby aligning "otherwise unrelated divisions, emasculating cross-cutting cleavages, and dividing society and politics into two separate, opposing, and unyielding blocks" (Somers & McCoy, 2018:3; Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019:7; Törnberg et al., 2021).

In sum, we are witnessing the emergence of a new type of TikTok authority: based exclusively on algorithmic visibility and engagement metrics, it is by its very nature anti-elitist, anti-establishment, and radically egalitarian. These features of the platform and the type of "algorithmic authority" (Lustig et al., 2016) it breeds may explain why TikTok is particularly well suited for spreading and magnifying populist messages, and, indeed, is best placed – among many other platforms – to launch successful new populist projects.

Taken together, these features suggest a broader mechanism through which TikTok influences political outcomes:

Platform affordances (algorithms, sharing) → Visibility incentives (likes, reach, virality) → Affective content (likes, reach, virality) → Anti-elite narratives ("people vs elites") → Electoral mobilization (voting, turnout).

This mechanism, linking features of the platform TikTok to populist mobilization, can be spelled out in more detail thus: (1) algorithms on TikTok promote engagement-driven visibility; (2) these incentives reward emotionally intense, personalized, and simplified forms of communication; (3) affective communication frequently relies on antagonistic narratives and moralized framing; (4) audience antagonism is part of the toolkit of reactionary politics (Kelly, 2025), as such narratives resonate strongly with populist and anti-establishment political actors, whose representational logic emphasizes directness, authenticity, and hostility toward institutional elites (Cervi et al., 2023; González-Aguilar et al., 2023). Finally, (5) repeated exposure to emotionally charged anti-elite messaging facilitates political mobilization. This mechanism works particularly well in party systems with weak institutionalization and high volatility, features that characterize the Bulgarian party system very well (Karasimeonov, 2002; Luybenov, 2011; Smilov, 2011).

A note of caution is due here: this mechanism does not in itself imply that TikTok *creates* populist mobilization or electoral instability. Rather, it only shows that the communicative logic of TikTok structurally *privileges* modes of political representation that are typical for populist politics. Populism, understood as an ideology that juxtaposes the "pure people" against the "corrupt elite" and promotes direct, unmediated representation, aligns closely with a media environment that rewards informality, personalization, and emotional immediacy (Ernst et al., 2019; Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2024; Widholm et al., 2024). In this sense, TikTok does not

merely serve as a neutral campaign tool; its architecture *advantages* actors whose communicative style fits the logic of algorithmic visibility.

Social media platforms such as TikTok are increasingly becoming the main news sources for Bulgarians. As Reuters Digital News Report 2025 highlights, Bulgaria scores the highest levels of news avoidance (63%), thus freeing up space for social media platforms to expand their influence (Newman et al., 2025). In an electorally volatile party system, such as in Bulgaria, where outsider actors have historically emerged abruptly even prior to the rise of TikTok, an alignment between a certain platform and a particular type of political actor may not generate volatility *per se*. However, it may accelerate and intensify the mechanisms through which anti-establishment actors gain visibility and recognition, and succeed in converting attention into political relevance and influence.

As TikTok seems to privilege some political actors more than others we propose the following hypothesis:

On TikTok, anti-establishment and populist actors achieve higher levels of algorithmic visibility than mainstream parties with their greater offline visibility, better access to traditional media (TV, Radio), and more financial resources. The differential visibility on TikTok contributes to the sudden political success of the former.

Thus, this article studies the connection between social platform affordances and populist representation, using the May 2024 EP and national parliament elections campaign in Bulgaria on TikTok.

Methodology

The data used in the analysis was gathered within the framework of the CO3 project during the EP elections campaign of 2024 and was systematized and published on the CO3 2024 EP elections dashboard (see Palonen et al., 2025). The dataset includes scraped data for the EU member states involved in the CO3 project (Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Portugal, Sweden) and screen recording data and research notes for ten European countries (the countries mentioned above plus Poland and Spain). During the election campaign and a week after the results came out, TikTok and Instagram feeds were monitored in the above-mentioned countries. Each country's TikTok field was observed by 3 researchers (30 in total for all countries) with each researcher monitoring two TikTok (and Instagram) profiles – a synthetic and an organic one. The synthetic profiles were custom-designed to aim at specific types of ideological content – left-green, center-right and far-right, corresponding to the political affiliations of the three major European party families in the given country. Each researcher focused on one of the above ideological profiles. Organic profiles were designed as “controls” – researchers behaved “naturally”, just scrolling and recording any politically relevant content, whether left, right or far-right. As a result, a dataset with audiovisual data from ten different EU national contexts was built, containing political content from TikTok and Instagram, providing a wealth of opportunities for analysis. The amount of videos recorded on TikTok and Instagram for Bulgaria is more than 40 hours (for the 6 organic and 6 synthetic accounts), with 1709 videos from the synthetic accounts included in the CO3 dashboard. The data collection period was from May 2024 when the EP campaign started until the 16th of June – a week after the elections. The dataset includes scraped and screen-recorded data, but also research notes filled in on a daily basis by the researchers in the CO3 team.

The journey met frustrating obstacles yet also led to interesting insights. The scrolling recordings revealed how algorithms could blur ideological boundaries, sometimes recommending far-right content to left-green profiles or (much more rarely) vice-versa. This highlighted the unpredictable nature of algorithmic curation and its potential to influence political preferences and outcomes. Researchers' daily notes added a human dimension to the data, capturing emotional reactions to polarising content and reflecting on platform differences. For instance, TikTok's algorithm amplified trending audio and visual memes, while Instagram often leaned on more polished, campaign-driven content (Palonen et al., 2025). These notes are part of the dataset as they advance our knowledge of discourses around the distinct platforms in the three types of political profiles. The research notes and visualisations based on them also serve as a foundation for the creation of the dataset. After the data-gathering period, the researchers completed an exit survey to collect researchers' ideas and experiences about the data-gathering process and to highlight some final reflections.

Using the collected data, this article analyzes and interprets the results of the European elections in Bulgaria, which took place together with the early parliamentary elections. In this respect, our reflections also address the results of the general elections. Through a case study of the political campaign on TikTok in Bulgaria before and during the 2024 EP elections, we aim to demonstrate that TikTok's platform affordances structurally privilege populist modes of representation, reshaping electoral competition. The Bulgarian case is worth analyzing because it may demonstrate how, in a highly volatile party system, newly formed political parties can achieve rapid electoral success without traditional political capital (institutionalised party structures and access to mainstream media), but through active presence on social media, especially TikTok and YouTube.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. The study is based on a descriptive case analysis and observational data from synthetic and organic social media profiles. While this approach allows valuable insights into platform dynamics, it does not allow direct measurement of causal relationships between TikTok exposure and voting behavior. Future research could combine platform observation with survey data, experimental designs, or large-scale computational analysis to better assess the extent to which social media exposure influences political attitudes and electoral choices.

Despite these limitations, the Bulgarian case illustrates how digital platforms are increasingly shaping the conditions under which political competition takes place. TikTok's algorithmic architecture does not merely distribute political messages; it reshapes the logic of political visibility itself. As political actors adapt their strategies to this new media environment, the relationship between social media platforms and democratic politics will likely become an increasingly important area of research in the coming years.

European and national election results in Bulgaria in 2024

Taking place together with the national parliament elections, the European Parliament (EP) elections were overshadowed by the former. The 2024 European Parliament elections in Bulgaria were held on June 9th and were conducted together with the pre-term national parliament elections. The turnout for the EP elections was 33.78% – a point higher than in 2019. The turnout for the national parliament elec-

tions was 34.41% – the lowest for national elections since 1989. This low turnout is likely the result of holding 6 (one regular and 5 pre-term) national elections within the span of just 3 years. After the mass anti-corruption protests of 2020, Bulgaria’s political elites have consistently failed to create a sustainable government that meets the public’s expectations for reform (Stoyanov & Lyubenov, 2024). The anti-corruption and reform-oriented political coalition PP-DB has been competing against reform-opposing GERB-SDS and DPS. Increasing party fragmentation has led to the blockade of important constitutionally established institutions (Stoyanov & Lyubenov, 2024). In an attempt to break the cycle of elections, the PP-DB and GERB formed an unpopular coalition after the April 2023 elections, which lasted only six months and ended in scandal. Against this backdrop, the European elections in June of 2024 took place.

In June 2024, both EP and national elections were won by the centre-right electoral alliance Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria party – Union of Democratic Forces (GERB-SDS). The EP elections campaign was dominated by national themes as it was run together with the campaign for national parliament elections – and the latter was deemed the more important one. The same applies to the leading political figures – dominant were the leaders of the lists for the national parliament, and only secondary attention was given to candidates for MEPs. As the Bulgarian electoral system is proportional with preferential voting, some very active former MEPs were prominent as were as several popular national politicians (Smilova, Velchev & Smilov, 2025).

Table 1. 2024 EP election results in Bulgaria

Party	Vote (%)
GERB-SDS/FEPC	23,55
DPS/APS	14,66
PP-DB	14,45
Vazrazhdane	13,98
BSP/Left	7,01
ITN/TMTH	6,04
Other parties	20,31

Source: European Parliament (2024).

Six parties and coalitions sent MEPs to the EP: centre-right GERB-SDS won 5 seats. Their MEPs joined the EPP group in the European parliament. DPS, which represents the ethnic Turks in Bulgaria, won 3 seats. The MEPs from DPS joined Renew Europe in EP. The liberal alliance PP-DB won 3 seats. Two of their MEPs entered Renew Europe and one of them joined the EPP group. The far right nationalist Vazrazhdane (Revival) party came fourth with 13.98% and won 3 seats. They joined the newly formed far-right “Europe of Sovereign Nations” group. Vazrazhdane did not have MEPs in 2019. The ex-communist party BSP won 2 seats. The MEPs from BSP joined S&D in EP. And finally “There is Such People”, a populist party created by the showman Slavi Trifonov, won 1 seat and joined the ECR in EP (Smilova, Velchev and Smilov, 2025).

Table 2. 9th June General election results in Bulgaria

Political Party	Number of Votes Won	% of Votes Won	Seats
Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)	530,658	23.99	68
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)	366,31	16.56	47
We Continue the Change–Democratic Bulgaria (PP–DB)	307,849	13.92	39
Revival (Vazrazhdane, V)	295,915	13.33	38
Socialist Party (BSP)	151,56	6.85	19
There is Such a People (ITN)	128,007	5.79	16
Greatness (Velichie)	99,862	4.51	13
Other	225,337	12.10	0
None of the above	63,913	2.89	0

Source: Centralna izbiratelna komisija (2024).

The national elections, for their part, produced similar results to the EP elections with 7 parties and alliances passing the 4% electoral threshold. The turnout for the pre-term national elections was the lowest on record and produced a fragmented parliament. The biggest surprise came from social media – especially YouTube and TikTok, where the newly formed nationalist populist party Velichie (Величие, Greatness) was gaining momentum while being entirely unnoticed by pollsters. Against the low turnout, it garnered just below 100,000 votes, proving just enough to clear the 4% threshold and send 13 MPs. The high activity on social media of Velichie turned out to be really effective in mobilizing voters. It served as a wake up call for researchers in Bulgaria to pay attention to the social media landscape and its influence on real politics. Our reflections on the data gathered during the campaigns aims to fill this gap by proposing directions and hypotheses for further research. The next part of the text is mostly descriptive, based on the data collected during the election campaign monitoring.

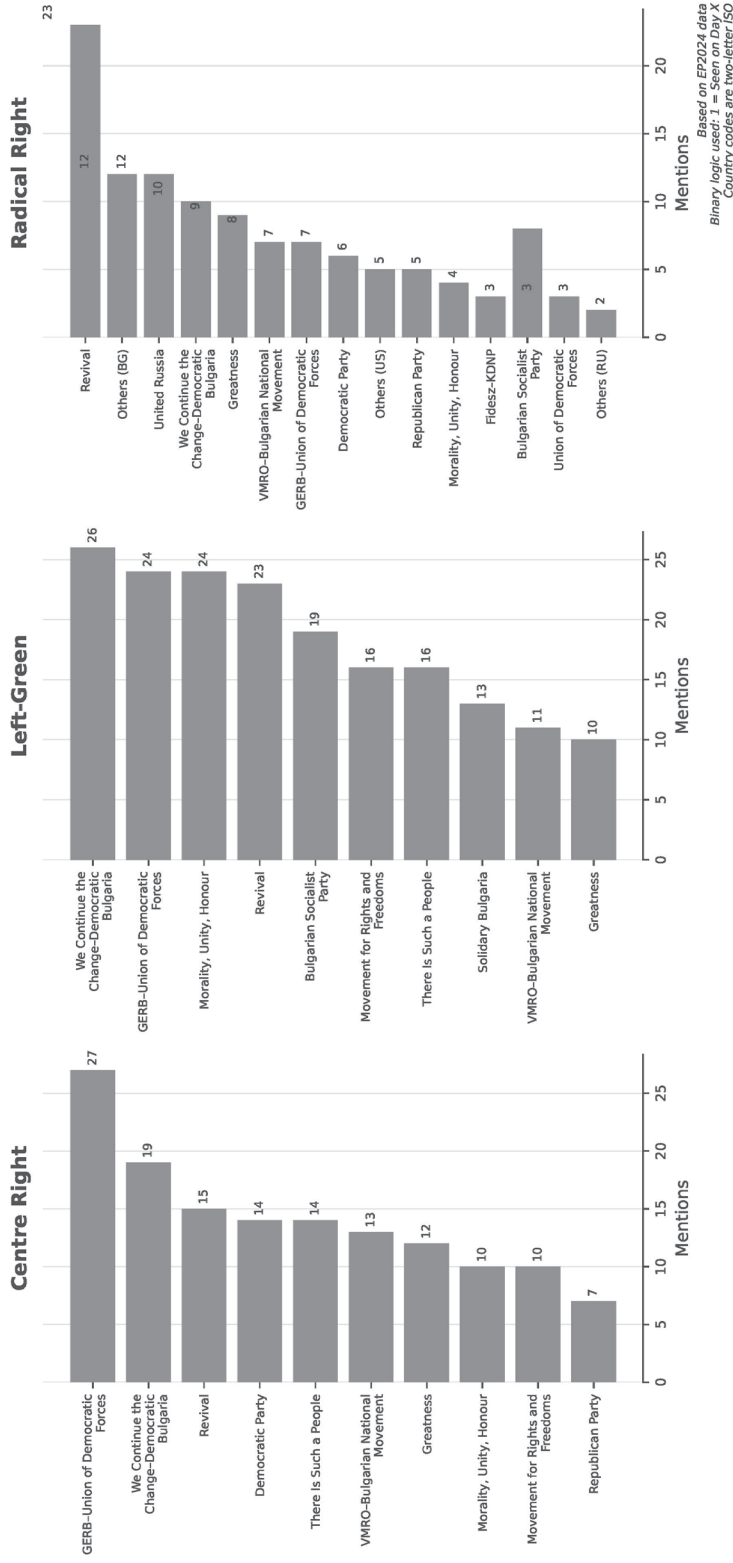
Election results and data interpretation

Building on the mechanism above (Platform affordances → Visibility incentives → Affective content → Anti-elite narratives → Electoral mobilization), we dig deeper into its individual components in the next part of the text by decoupling them and demonstrating their effect during the 2024 EP elections in Bulgaria.

Platform affordances and the power of algorithms

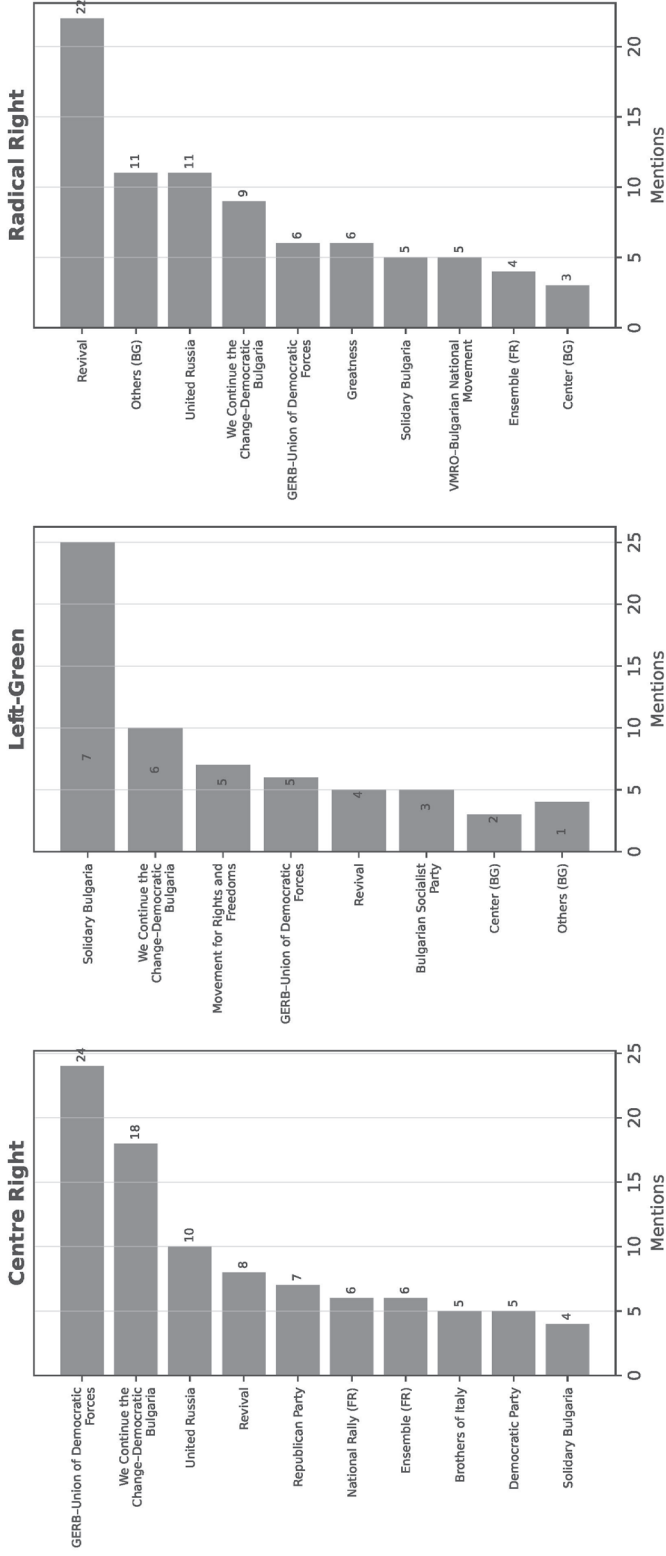
The field work under the C03 research project had clearly demonstrated that TikTok is the platform that offers much more political content compared to Instagram. As mentioned above, the researchers were given the task of monitoring specific types of ideological political content (left, centre-right and far-right). Over the course of the data gathering, the amount of political content increased dramatically. On the first day, the centre-right synthetic account on both Instagram and TikTok received no political content. TikTok, however, was very quickly trained and within a week or so,

Figure 1. Visibility of political parties by political profile on TikTok in Bulgaria



Source: Palonen et al. (2025: 31).

Figure 2. Visibility of political parties by political profile on Instagram



Source: Palonen et al. (2025: 32).

political content was already dominating both the synthetic and the organic profiles there. On Instagram, on the other hand, the amount of political content increased only in the last days before the election. The videos on Instagram were more repetitive and gave the impression that this platform as a whole was not a major field of political clashes.

As we can see from Figure 2 and 3 the frequency of political content is higher on TikTok among the different synthetic profiles. TikTok algorithms managed much faster than Instagram's to navigate the user into the type of content he or she was searching for. TikTok profiles started receiving political content in less than a day while on Instagram the users had to search deliberately for political content and started receiving such a couple of days before the election day (9th June). The data demonstrates also the algorithm's ability to navigate the user's political preferences on both platforms and suggest similar content to them. However, one of the general findings during the observation period for all countries clearly was that TikTok is the more politicized platform. This finding contradicts Chang et al. who argue that there is a "newsification" trend on Instagram which increases the use of the platform for information purposes, including on political topics (Chang et al., 2024).

The organic profiles content, gathered during the election campaign, is not available on the CO3 dashboard. It can, nevertheless, be identified via the research field notes and they clearly indicate that Ivelin Mihaylov and Nikolay Markov – Velichie's leading political figures – gained more visibility on TikTok (along with Radostin Vassilev, the leader of party MECH – another new political party that stormed the Bulgarian party system via the social media platform TikTok). Markov, Mihaylov and Vassilev turned out to be very successful in gaining visibility and likes on neutral, "organic" profiles. The high degree of visibility on social media allowed the party Velichie to enter parliament without being present in the mainstream media during the election campaign. At the beginning of the campaign its leaders were so unrecognizable that researchers were unsure who they were and whether to record them on their screens while conducting the study.

Content visibility

As mentioned in section three, visibility is a central value in the hierarchy of social platforms (Recuero, 2024). Through visibility, content creators earn more likes. Likes, in turn, legitimize the user and place him or her higher in the social media hierarchy. A number of researches demonstrate that TikTok has emerged as a prominent platform for marginalized groups, providing opportunities for activism and representation (Sayed and Hotait, 2024) through the platform visibility. TikTok is enabling young citizens as well to voice their political opinions in innovative and culturally relevant ways. Through memes, creative edits, and music, political content on TikTok seamlessly integrates humor and pop culture references, shaping a distinctive form of digital political discourse (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019). In that sense, TikTok legitimize minorities and youth as important electoral groups because of their effective use of this media. This fact has not gone unnoticed by political actors, who have begun targeting these voter groups with messages on social media.

Radostin Vassilev, for instance, was particularly active in trying to mobilize the Roma minority. He constructs himself as a nationalist and uses nationalist narratives very actively on social media. Like Velichie, MECH campaigned exclusively on social media and managed to gain 3% of the vote and almost entered the parliament.

Having in mind the strong presence of Roma on TikTok, MECH explicitly appealed in their campaign to the Roma community, placing the Romani pop-folk diva Roxana as the lead of the party's list in two districts. Radostin Vassilev himself explicitly attempted to inscribe Roma into the nationalist canon. In several videos, the leader of MECH states that the Roma are Bulgarian citizens and that their traditions and jobs are threatened by immigrants. Those videos are available on the CO3 RP2024 dashboard. This nationalist turn in MECH campaign among the Roma is to an extent a surprising development, as the nationalist narratives (such as MECHs) are often anti-Roma dominated. Yet Radostin Vasilev expands the concept of "true Bulgarian" by portraying Roma as Bulgarian patriots, while replacing the target of hate. However, visibility alone is not enough to overcome stigma and change the social status of minorities. Rather, it aims at recognition (Civila et al., 2023; Sayed & Hotait, 2024). In the case of the Roma minority in Bulgaria, the strong TikTok presence and virality has not brought recognition. The Roma minority is still very much left behind, a marginalized group in the social hierarchy. However, the visibility that TikTok gives to Roma people is encouraging politicians to change their tactics towards this group. Roma people are beginning to be targeted as potential voters, and ways are being sought to mobilize them electorally through ideological messages. In contrast to these recent developments, over the years the Roma vote in Bulgaria has been associated mainly with controlled voting and vote buying (Mares et al., 2017).

As for the youth, there was a considerable supply of EP-sponsored content both on TikTok and Instagram, which aimed to convince young Bulgarians to vote in the EP elections. The campaign often used influencers to target these younger audiences. Young people in particular are exposed to radical discourses due to their socialization which goes mainly through social media (more than any other previous generations). One can argue that we've already seen the payoff of exposing youth to radical narratives during the EP elections 2024 which marked an enormous increase of popularity of the far-right parties among young voters (Vinocur & Goury-Laffont, 2024). However, the election results from Bulgaria do not support such a hypothesis. Exit poll data from all the seven general elections conducted from April 2021 till June 2024 including the EP elections, demonstrate that young Bulgarians do not support far-right nationalist parties to a higher degree, relative to other age groups. Nevertheless, the youth vote in Bulgaria has some other distinctive features. Mainstream parties perform poorly among young voters. Newly established parties win the majority of the youth vote, regardless of whether they are populist (ITN) or liberal (PP-DB) formations. Therefore, Bulgaria serves as a case that demonstrates that the youth vote is not ideologically motivated by the far-right, but rather is mostly a protest, anti-establishment vote.

Recent analysis argues that social media like TikTok could be used effectively by young people not only to create a toxic environment, but also to build supportive communities that mobilize for certain causes (Brown, Pini & Pavlidis, 2022; Dynel & Poppi, 2021).

"Though the location in the TikTok elicited feelings of anxiety and fear, for Isabel the dance trend simultaneously evoked feelings of hope and relief, providing further evidence of the way in which humour in politically oriented social media can recalibrate negative emotions such as anxiety, fear and frustration into positive affective states" (Dynel & Poppi, 2021).

In this sense, social media, and TikTok in particular, do indeed play a significant role in the socialization of young people, but this does not necessarily lead to their radicalization.

Affective content and radicalization of discourse

Although radical discourse on social media was not particularly effective in mobilizing the youth vote in Bulgaria at this stage, its intensity during the campaign was noticeable. During the election campaign fieldwork under the C03 project, researchers noticed that negative campaigning was prevalent on TikTok. Most of the political content promoted conspiracy theories or attacked political opponents by dehumanizing them. The videos aimed at producing frustration on the user. As some of the fieldnotes highlight: “TikTok felt as a disturbing media by our team. It was stressful, direct, immediate – people were immediately involved in an emotional connection with the protagonists, which was very often negative.” Regardless of the output considering affections, it was well captured that TikTok really creates space dominated by radical narratives.

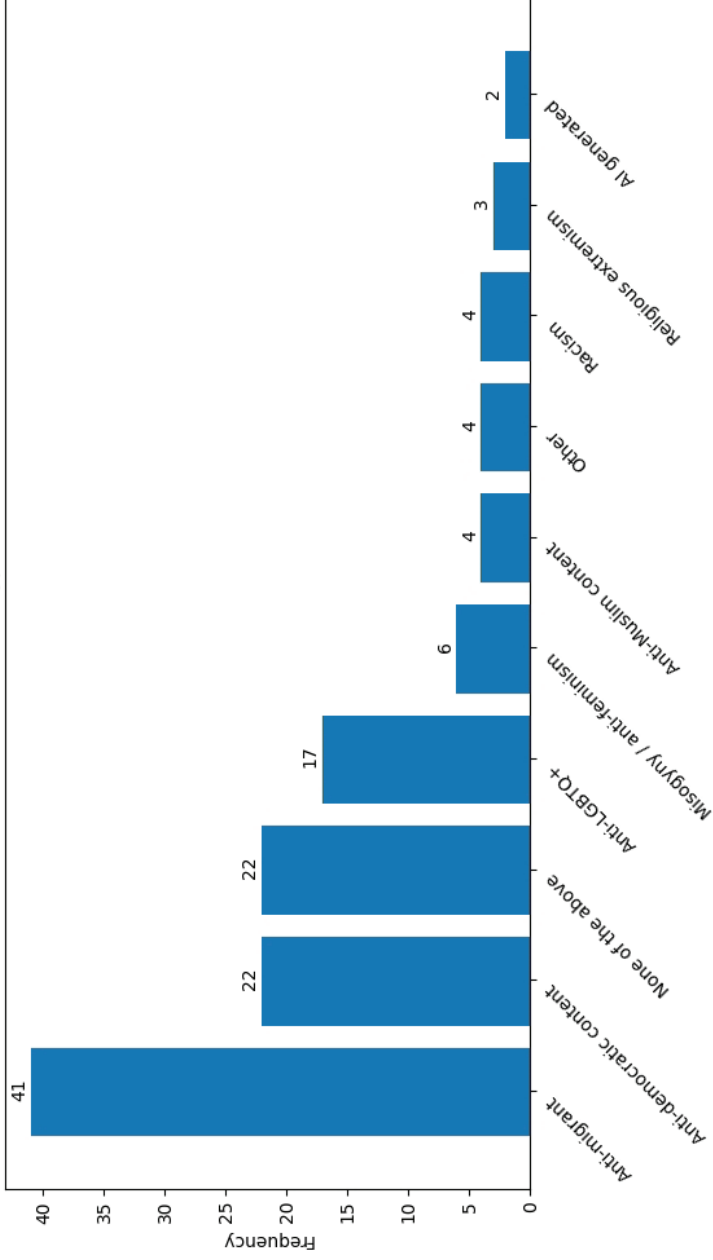
As is visible from Figure 4, the political content on the feeds of all the profiles, irrespective of their ideological-political orientation, was dominated by topics typically related to far-right political positions – such as anti-migration, anti-democratic and anti-liberal (anti-LGBTQ and anti-minority rights) content. The more radical the content, the more memorable it is, the more emotions it generates for the user thus prompting engagement and turning radical content into viral content.

According to fieldnotes TikTok facilitates the radicalization of discourses through two emotional mechanisms – fear and frustration. Radical discourses legitimize hate speech and other forms of debates, unsafe for the democratic order. They create toxic environments which have the capacity not only to amplify, but to silence discourses as well (Recuero, 2024). In this way, a new type of voter is constructed, who does not see traditional parties and politicians as an option to support in elections. TikTok content successfully constructs traditional politicians, media and experts as enemies. They become the object of the frustration engendered in the user and their political mobilisation henceforth is to punish the elite, by voting for the marginal political players who use social media effectively. These observations are in line with recent research indicating that social media platforms like TikTok play a significant role in fostering radical discourse and affective polarization (Törnberg et al., 2021; Brown, Pini & Pavlidis, 2022; Recuero, 2024).

TikTok and the Mobilization of Anti-Establishment Actors

As mentioned above, turnout for the national parliament elections, which were run together with the EP elections, was the lowest for national elections in Bulgaria since 1989. This was expected against the backdrop of multiple snap elections that failed to produce a stable government. Since 2021, the country has instead been governed by unstable and unpopular coalitions. Given the widespread demotivation among Bulgarian voters to vote, it may seem counterintuitive to talk about a new type of political mobilization through TikTok. Yet, while TikTok did not determine electoral outcomes by itself, the data do indicate that its communicative logic created particularly favorable conditions for outsider political actors. The most illustrative examples are the unexpected rise of Velichie and the near-parliamentary threshold result of MECH. It was precisely the combination of low mobilization among tradi-

Figure 3. Distribution of the type of content visible on TikTok and Instagram feeds (Bulgaria)



Source: Palonen et al. (2025: 56).

tional voters and the high mobilization achieved by anti-establishment actors on social media that led to their surprisingly high results.

Both newcomer parties entered the campaign with extremely limited visibility in traditional media and without the organizational infrastructure normally associated with a successful political party. Nevertheless, their leading figures achieved high levels of visibility within TikTok feeds observed during the study. The presence of these actors across both synthetic and organic profiles suggests that their content circulated beyond narrowly defined ideological audiences, reaching users who were not intentionally seeking political content. Both parties Velichie and MECH were not very ideologically coherent and lacked clear political programs. Their narrative was strongly anti-establishment. They were highly critical towards the mainstream parties, the European elite, and the Green deal, presenting themselves as the only alternative.

The Bulgarian case therefore provides an example of how digital platforms may reshape the pathways through which political actors gain recognition and legitimacy. Rather than relying on traditional media gatekeepers, new parties can use platforms such as TikTok to build direct relationships with audiences, cultivate a sense of authenticity, and rapidly expand their visibility.

Discussion

The Bulgarian case serves as an example of how TikTok's platform affordances shape political visibility and electoral competition. Building on existing literature on TikTok affordance, platformization, algorithmic visibility, and populist political representation, the analysis proposed a mechanism linking platform design to explain the political mobilization effectiveness through social media and TikTok more concretely. It goes like this: platform affordances encourage engagement-driven visibility, which in turn rewards affective, more direct and simplified forms of communication that often resonate with anti-elite narratives.

The empirical observations from the Bulgarian case largely support this argument. The monitoring of TikTok feeds during the election campaign revealed that political content appeared quickly and frequently, particularly compared to Instagram. The platform's algorithm proved highly efficient in identifying and reinforcing ideological preferences, rapidly directing users toward specific types of political content as already noted in other research (Li, Cheng & Zuniga, 2025). In this environment, visibility became the primary form of legitimacy, measured through likes, shares, and comments (Recuero, 2024) rather than through institutional authority or established political credibility. In fact, formal institutions seem to have no authority at all in social media communication.

The most important political implication of these dynamics was the relative advantage enjoyed by outsider actors. Newcomer parties such as Velichie and MECH were able to achieve levels of visibility that would have been difficult to obtain through traditional media channels. The success of Velichie in entering parliament despite minimal coverage in mainstream media demonstrates how digital platforms can alter the balance of opportunities in electoral competition. It also alters the cost structure of electoral competition, allowing political actors with less organizational and financial capital to be competitive with mainstream parties.

At the same time, we should be careful to not overstate TikTok's influence on electoral competition. TikTok is not the only factor determining electoral success, but is rather a new phenomenon whose influence should be taken into account. The platform does not automatically translate online popularity into electoral success, nor does it uniformly radicalize voters. In the Bulgarian case, youth voters did not disproportionately support far-right parties despite their strong presence on TikTok. Instead, younger voters tended to support newly established political actors across the ideological spectrum, indicating that their voting behavior reflects broader patterns of anti-establishment, anti-status-quo protest rather than ideological mobilization.

Nevertheless, TikTok contributes to a transformation of political communication characterized by amplification of personalization in politics, emotional intensity, and the weakening of traditional media gatekeeping. In volatile party systems such as Bulgaria's, these dynamics facilitate the rapid emergence of new political actors and reinforce anti-establishment narratives that portray traditional institutions as illegitimate or corrupt.

Conclusion

The Bulgarian case presented here illustrates how TikTok's platform logic shapes the conditions under which political visibility is produced and contested. By privileging engagement as the key metric of relevance, this platform shifts the basis of political legitimacy away from institutional authority toward algorithmically mediated attention. While this transformation does not replace traditional forms of political competition, it increasingly operates alongside them, influencing the ways actors enter the political arena.

Our findings suggest that TikTok lowers barriers to political participation by enabling outsider actors to bypass established media structures. While granting easier, more egalitarian entry into the political arena to less institutionalized actors with more limited organizational and other resources, it also contributes to a more fluid and less predictable electoral environment, where visibility can be rapidly gained without having the historical prerequisites – such as established organization, stable funding, etc. – for political success. This dynamic plays out particularly well in fragmented and volatile party systems, where small shifts in visibility can have disproportionate electoral effects.

The Bulgarian case also highlights the limits of this platform. While TikTok facilitates exposure and engagement, it does not unidirectionally and deterministically shape political preferences or electoral outcomes. Electoral behavior remains mediated by broader socio-political dynamics, and online prominence does not guarantee political success. This platform's impact is therefore best understood as conditional and context-dependent. The analysis also points to a qualitative transformation in political communication. The growing prominence of affective, personalized, and simplified messaging reflects not only strategic adaptation by political actors but structural incentives embedded in platform design as well. This raises broader questions about the long-term implications for democratic deliberation, particularly regarding the marginalization of more complex policy discourse and the erosion of traditional media gatekeeping functions.

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Uloga TikToka u oblikovanju političkih ishoda za vrijeme izbora za Europski parlament u Bugarskoj 2024. godine

Sažetak Ovaj članak ispituje ulogu TikToka u oblikovanju političke vidljivosti i izbornog nadmetanja tijekom izbora za Europski parlament 2024. godine u Bugarskoj. Studija se pita da li TikTok funkcionira kao neutralni alat kampanje ili pak njegova arhitektura strukturno pogoduje određenim vrstama političkih aktera, posebno populističkim i onima koji se pozicioniraju protiv establišmenta. Na temelju podataka prikupljenih u okviru istraživačkog projekta CO3, uključujući preko 40 sati promatranja platforme i više od 1700 snimljenih videa, analiza istražuje obrasce širenja sadržaja, angažmana korisnika i narativnog uokviravanja. Nalazi sugeriraju da TikTokov algoritam daje prioritet emocionalno nabijenom, personaliziranom i pojednostavljenom sadržaju, što je usko povezano s populističkim stilovima komunikacije. Kao rezultat toga, vanjski politički akteri mogu postići visoku razinu vidljivosti i brzo izgraditi političku relevantnost. Bugarski slučaj pokazuje kako TikTok olakšava pojavu novih političkih aktera kao što su Velichie i MECH, koji su iskoristili platformu za mobilizaciju podrške unatoč minimalnoj prisutnosti u mainstream medijima. Istovremeno, studija ističe ograničenja utjecaja platforme: TikTok ne određuje izravno izborne ishode, a njegovi učinci posredovani su širom socio-političkom dinamikom, uključujući izostanak angažmana birača te nestabilnost stranačkog sustava. Sveukupno, članak tvrdi da TikTok mijenja logiku političke konkurencije prebacujući legitimnost s institucionalnog autoriteta na mogućnosti i vidljivost platforme, čime se jačaju narativi protiv establišmenta i transformira demokratski proces.

Ključne riječi TikTok, Bugarska, izbori za Europski parlament, politička komunikacija, polarizacija, političke stranke, politika društvenih mreža, populizam, algoritamska vidljivost