

“Weaponizing” Humor in Bulgarian Political Rhetoric: Limits of Political Speech in National and Transnational Perspectives

Vladislav Vasilev

Sofia University, St. Kliment Ohridski, Bulgaria

In the wake of internet spoiling global audiences with memes and political satire, humor established itself as an intrinsic part of contemporary political rhetoric. A universal notion of humor and free speech, however, yet remain an abstract concept as the national context and the meta-narrative allow partisan interpretation, thus drawing the line between laughter and unlaughter. Nonetheless, the clichéd view of the satirist as a rebel, “speaking truth to power” is struggling to fit the image of the right-wing populists, using humor as a tool to aid marketing political ideas both nationally and globally. In respect to political speech, while humor is an eligible means for singling out political allies globally, it is the national state that is the agora on which standards and limits of free speech, ergo what is humor, are negotiated. This article tackles how humor in Bulgarian election campaign in 2021-2022 is used to serve the populist right-wing agenda in pursuit of political advantages over opponents and how the usage of global context fits in the local framework. In a field of political distrust and competing polar ideologies, the problem resides in how the national nuances of defining humor affect political meanings, identity, and the local discourse on culture wars. The article also takes a transnational comparative approach to political humor in the context of its partisan exploit for populist political purposes in European democracies.

Keywords: free speech, Bulgaria, political humor, populism, elections, far-right populism

The Role of Humor in Online Political Communication

In the era of internet memes and social media satire, entertainment has become an integral part of the contemporary political discourse. The populist urge to maintain public attention to partisan interpretations increasingly relies on humorous narratives in which the assertion of political views can be at the expense of political opponents. And while political humor and satire are a universally recognized vehicle for free speech, a tool of the powerless to critique the status quo and hold authority to account in democracies, they also increasingly appear as an element of political campaigning during electoral agitation. The clichéd concept of satire as a weapon of the minority against power however is unable to fit the dynamics of contemporary political discourse as internet jokes are increasingly exploited by populist political figures for both fortifying their agendas and maintaining the traditional tension between the ruling class and the governed, typical for representative democracies. In today’s digital reality, social media satirists have the status of cultural figures with social and

Vladislav Vasilev, Masters in Political Science, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of European Studies, Sofia University, St. Kliment Ohridski, Bulgaria.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Vladislav Miroslavov Vasilev, 312 B, Matey Preobrazhenski str., p.c.1336, district Lulin 3, Sofia, Bulgaria.

political influence over their loyal audiences, along with being “notorious for not respecting social or religious conventions” (Webber, Momen, Finley, Krefting, & Willet, 2020). In this frame, the rhetorician-satirist uses the political context (*kairos*) and the populist inertia to gain a greater level of public trust (*ethos*) behind the mask of a speaker, external to the ruling class (Rolfe, 2021, pp. 92-112). The hybrid environment of the online discourse also allowed for the satirist to compete with politicians and journalists for public credibility in the exercise of what Greham Meikle (2008) defines as “symbolic power”¹ among the different social groups.

As the active manipulation and dissemination of imagery and ideas online became a communication standard, humor increasingly appears on the proscenium of the digitally visualized political discourse, both with the purpose to challenge the traditional information hierarchy by the witty interpretation of social and political truths, and also to relieve social tensions. As public discourse migrated to the common communicational spaces online, politicians, the media, and citizens became equally media equipped to assert their particular interpretations of reality and truth en masse, thus entering a process of constant negotiation of credibility between the different communicators. This all occurs within the metrics system for evaluating social engagement, e.g. number of likes, shares, followers, retweets, etc. where social media became a space for culture-making, in which each user can effectively contribute to the public discourse through entertainment. Web 2.0. additionally spoiled audiences as it replaced the linear, televised versions of popular political entertainment, with easily accessed, interactive, modifiable modern forms of entertainment which provides an experience fixated on the mediator (Hariman, 2008), and users are well equipped to function as self-dependent media with broad social impact over the public debate via different platforms and channels. As Mark Prior (2007) drew attention to politics not occurring in empty space but in the media, it is the new internet media environment that constitutes the battlefield of contemporary political ideas. Thus, in the online space of ideological conflict, the competing political players are predisposed to seek strategic advantages over their opposition predominantly by pursuing the public attention, a process in which humor and satire are central to the attractiveness of political speech and its effect on political allies and enemies alike (Jones, Baym, & Day, 2012; Kumar & Combe, 2015).

Why Humor Thrives in the Dimension of Political Scandal

With populism infiltrating the public discourse, entertainment is an essential tool for attracting media attention as the linguistic meaning of the term suggests. According to the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition, the earliest use of entertainment signifies “mutual restraint; mutual entanglement”, with an etymology deriving from the Latin words *inter* (between) and *tenere* (hold), thus allowing entertainment to be interpreted as “attention retention” or “focus of attention” (Shusterman, 2003, p. 292). In the context of Herbert Simon’s (1966) concept of the economics of attention, political humor and satire entertain and serve as a communication strategy for outlining and marketing political ideas amid the opulence of information online. As political humor exploits the collision between global cultural trends and the nuances of national identity and political tradition alike, however, its effects are by design a recipe for evoking contradiction and conflicts, as it engages social attention on subtle interpretations of truth, morals, rights, culture, and believes. As humor and satire thrive in dangerous confined spaces between firm beliefs (Rakopoulos, 2015), the “democratic” ridicule is often hazardous speech outside the

¹ Meikle argued that media, as a “business of determining reality”, allows for five separate groups to exercise symbolic power. Being among these five are satirists, who have media and cultural impact because they are recognizable authors, speakers, and individuals who exercise symbolic power through criticism of how others exercise symbolic power (Meikle, 2008).

inner cultural circle. Additionally, the affirmation of global heterogeneity instead of pure homogeneity or in other words *glocalization*² (Ritzer, 2003), is what mostly influences the realm of political humor, turning it into a digital amalgam of globally shared media trends like memes, satirical news, or parody profiles in social media, modified in the language of the local folklore and socio-political tradition. Global connectivity however does not presuppose mutual understanding, which brings the question of the universal limits of humor in the domain of the abstract, since the forces that influence social and individual opinion-making are often of opposite effect. On one hand, it is the national state, being the imaginary community with legal and political sovereignty (Anderson 2006), that constitutes the arena where standards and demarcation lines of what is acceptable speech, ergo what is humor are negotiated. On the other, social media platforms challenge the authority of the state in the production of meaning as they facilitate the formation of new social groups online around transnational and trans-ideological narratives and standards, some of which are radical in nature, thus influencing the dynamics of the public dialogue about social norms and limits of free speech within the state. Such persisting tension in public communication naturally influences the political debate and also the attitude of political actors towards the relation between agitation and entertainment in the digital era.

The new media environment allows for political humor and satire to actively be exploited for the discursive engagement of population (Chmel, Savin, & Delli Carpini, 2018) as they influence political engagement, the formation of protest, and radical movements (Toepfl, 2018) inhabiting satire driven digital spaces for far-right politics, evident globally (Prisk 2017; Hakoköngäs, Halmesvaara, & Sakki, 2020; and others). A study by the European Commission in 2021 even suggested satirical memes are exploited for far-right extremism purposes in the EU and advocated for their strict regulation in social media, abstractly provided for in the 2022 legislative Regulation packages DSA and DMA. A problem with such interpretations however resides in lack of universal terminology in the dimension of humor. The definitions of humor and satire are not uniform legislative concepts of neither the EU, nor the national state law, which bounds the approach to the genre within the common social understanding of its significance and features, which may vary in different democracies, due to nuances of their cultural and social tradition. As public discourse unfolds in different social media, the platforms' increasing editorial functions in applying subjective standards for speech influence the political and social struggles within the state about determining what satiric limits should be acceptable. Amid variety of global crises, the clash between western liberal trends like woke culture, cancel culture, etc., and their national interpretation, affects the political discourse as well, paving the way for political opportunism and populism to dominate the public debate in discussing morals, social norms, freedoms, and ultimately truth. In the wake of the global cultural and ideological clash unfolding on national political stages, especially in representative democracies, populist parties are increasingly exploiting political entertainment for attractively infiltrating the market of ideas, improving their social media presence while agitating for a partisan interpretation of reality (e.g. Anti-vax policies, Pro-Russian political movements, etc.) and claim political representation of minorities.

Humor and satire excel at the domain of political scandal as their inherent state of paradox and playfulness allow for subtle political messages to provoke collective emotional reactions towards policies, ideology, and truth. With prolonged exposure to extreme “playful” content however the extreme ideology is normalized across

² The concept of *glocalization* was introduced by Robertson in 1995 and was borrowed from Japanese business circles. It denotes a process of telescoping the global on the local scale, creating an aperture in which even global culture is introduced into local norms (Robertson, 1995, p. 28).

platforms (Marwick & Lewis, 2018, p. 37), raising the question of where limits should be. Emotions have a strong influence on how one perceives political messages and separates laughter from unlaughter. Humor can be an individual and collective therapeutic procedure for getting attention and reducing social tension (Welker, 1977), serving as a mechanism for relief of and managing strong emotions (see Keith-Spiegel, 1972; Attardo, 2017), but can also be a tool for ad hominem attacks and aggression, exercised as a form of edification over those who violate social norms (Monro, 1988) with the purpose of asserting social superiority, thus reinforcing social tensions. Negative emotions have a major influence over the assessment of political comedy as they stimulate the evaluation of political messages within the binary system of *profit-loss* and have impact on the attitudes towards different policies and ideas (Yeo & McKasy, 2021), the spread of rumors and misinformation online (Pröllochs, Bär, & Feuerriegel, 2021), as well as over social behavior and civic activity on collective and individual level (Lee & Jang, 2017), ultimately falling into the concept of humor as a relief mechanism (Sultanoff, 1992). The palette of political satire, memes and parody profiles in social media established the informal approach to political matters in democracies as a standard for the digital, making politics a trivial experience. Establishing the different humorous genres as the nuanced, yet globally valid digital slang for political critique, social media elevated the shared visuals and cultural meanings to a symbolic code, an interface for the emotional and often existential response of the individual to the global political and economic turmoil.

Such response, however, can be seen as radical in nature, due to the fact what constitutes “sense of humor” is as much a shared social and cultural procedure as a cognitive and emotional condition of individuality. If humor is an optical tool of our inner beliefs about the world, the concept that morally flawed themes as racism, sexism, xenophobia, etc. in jokes attract people with similar views (Bergson, 1996) is equally applicable with the vision that immoral humor engages moral people by making the expression funnier in general (Smuts, 2010; Shuster, 2013). With this in mind, the hybrid online environment, drowned in propaganda, disinformation, and hate speech, stimulates right-wing politics, as an art of opportunity, to adopt populist features in using humor and satire for entertaining audiences and singling out political allies, while simultaneously ridiculing and antagonizing political enemies and ideas, under the guise of jokes. This is possible since humor serves as a discursive procedure for authorizing the speaker with communicative power, which under the guise of a “mere joke” can be used to discredit others and cause reputational damage intercontextually. It is the vague boundary between laughter and unlaughter, revealed in either the carnivalesque or serious approach to context, that forms the inherent paradox of humor—is there such thing as “just a joke” in politics. In the context of political debate humor serves as a form of political advocacy and public corrective with both the conservative function of reducing social tensions towards power (Baker, 2001) or provoking and confronting political elites, challenging their ability to fulfill their promises. Political humor and satire can thus operate as instruments for social segregation, based on cultural and political stereotypes. That implies the broad political demonstration of the likeminded corresponds to the forceful discursive marginalizing of others, where satire can be used as a tool of legitimate violence in democracies (Rio, 2015, pp. 12-25).

The problem resides in that while communication trends and media are global, the universal notion of humor and free speech is unshared even among democratic countries. Political humor is a cultural and technological remix of different versions of reality, which imposes an assessment of deficits in politics and society and causes either the assimilation or exclusion of groups from the inner cultural circle. With the democratization of online communication, global connectivity and access to content, political and cultural critique with humor and satire

provides condition for emerging conflicts the more viral the message gets. Political jokes immanently polarize the public debate, even within the state, as they bring the debate about the meta-context of humor and limits of free speech among inhomogeneous audiences whose interpretation of seriousness, ergo the perceived political meanings, is often polar. As political jokes always imply a certain tone of seriousness, the question of social responsibility of politicians and public figures about the use of extreme humor in public debate reemerges, as politics and societies become more diverse and more digitally interconnected. In terms of political humor, the balance between personal rights and public interest have always challenged the boundaries of free speech, with the process becoming increasingly complicated online, where communication is not limited to the national legislative standards, but is subject of cross-cultural validation. In democratic societies of today, amid the array of communicational crises, dissemination of hateful speech, disinformation, and propaganda, audiences are progressively decreasing their trust in traditional news and authority, as informational substitutes, imitating credibility, are filling the attention gaps with online political entertainment that established itself as a reliable tool for pursuing social influence and discursively asserting truths.

In the above-mentioned context for political humor on the internet, it came as no surprise that while populists are struggling to be social media influencers, humor is increasing its influence as a communication strategy for radical political and cultural critique via different platforms, hosting the conflict between the liberal and orthodox views in modern democratic societies. Therefore, an eclectic approach towards political humor requires an exploration of its weaponization in the political discourse including in the perspective of social media’s role in influencing the context with the imposition of different standards and regulations for free speech, that ultimately influences meaning-making. Such perspective is important because for humor to effectively propagate certain political ideas it inevitably offends or antagonizes others, the effect of which is amplified in social media environment due to the modus in which platform algorithms suggest content to its users. This occurs due to social media narrowing information consumption to customizable, “boutique” information spaces, where the user—“egocaster” (Rosen, 2004) operates in a digital reality tailored by individual tastes. Such personal echo chambers of repeated information (Kaplan, 2009) disperse into bigger digital structures (groups) that host the discourse between the ideologically like-minded but also provide conditions for messages and concepts foreign to the “information bubble” to be perceived negatively, with distrust and even belligerence. With social media personalizing information and experiences, the exposure of individual political views to public validation online unlocks an inevitable discursive conflict, which is complicated additionally with the involvement of jokes, memes, and political satire, as they reproduce the cognitive processes of assessing political meanings on the level of emotions, beliefs, and individual assessments, influencing what constitutes the concept of “a sense of humor”. As humor and satire mimic other genres to produce comedic commentary, they often unintentionally reproduce the effects of harmful speech, disinformation, and propaganda. The online dissemination of such phenomena is reliant, among other factors, to social attitudes about post-truth, identity, and group conformity (McIntyre, 2018), where the disturbed harmony in communicating polar attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors push societies into the state of cognitive dissonance (see Festinger, 1962), and satirical critique can solely be considered an act of aggression. Thus, the lack of distance between personal ideas and their exposure to public judgment online maintains the condition of persistent communicational struggle, that leads to the lack of mutual respect, respect to authority, and ultimately a society of scandal (Han, 2017).

Facebook, Political Representation, and Parliament Elections: The Bulgarian Context

As political humor plays a crucial role in the Balkan's political and social transition, from challenging authoritarian regimes and promoting democratic values to being a form of discrimination, that reinforces existing power dynamics (see Smith, 1994; Jovanović, 2019), the digitalization of public debate via social media increased the significance of political comedy as a tool for public participation and protest among younger citizens. Such perspective is crucial because humor and satire are a space that successfully invites young audiences to “play” with the political (see Jones et al., 2009; 2012) and stimulates social activity by “representing issues of great civil importance” through user-generated content (Reilly, 2012, p. 273). Studies suggest that political behavior among young people is influenced by their reliance on new media for political information (Lee, 2014), where humor and satire are reaction to the domain of political scandal but also a form of “e-tactics” (Earl & Kimport, 2011) for civic participation. Although a significant corpus of studies focuses on the negative aspects of political memes in the public sphere (e.g. Ross & Rivers, 2017; Topinka, 2018), researchers increasingly view satire in the context of today's hybridized news and entertainment, as a “good form of political education” (Hall, 2014), that encourages exposure to political information and participation in the public discourse (Chmel et al., 2018). This invites populism to exploit political humor and satire as an indicator of political emancipation (Payne, 2017), that allows reactive political actors exploit the inherent paradox of the genre as an online strategy for the subtle assertion of their political values and identity among politically inexperienced or unrepresented audiences. Humor also aids the discursive political exoneration, as jokes are also a tool for dismissing any discrediting accusation as trivial or unserious.

Blurring the line between serious and unserious, humor allows political actors to imitate authority over the right to include or exclude different ideas and social groups from the public life, thus offering political representation to social minorities, radicals, or formations of contemporary phenomena like anti-vax movements, conspiracies, etc. As societies become increasingly digitalized and the importance of social media for public debate is significantly growing, the traditional role of political actors to balance social tensions through the representation of opposing interests in society is inevitably entering the dynamic discursive space of online meta-reality, where interests, beliefs, and groups are formed transnationally and trans-ideologically. Today, when various regional, international, and nongovernmental actors and networks, such as EU and NATO, have representative claims and functions (Anheier, Kaldor, & Glasius, 2004; Saward, 2006; Urbinati & Warren, 2008), the national political discourse is influenced by the interrelations between different contextual dimensions, which in respect to humor, increase its potential intended effects in public speaking (Xu, 2015). And as “representation is crucial in constituting democratic practices” (Plotke 1997, p. 19), the attractiveness of political discourse is crucial for the attempt of populist entrepreneurs to occupy the vacating political and ideological spaces among social groups. And although representation has a recognizable influence over public opinion beyond the ballot (Saward, 2006; Warren, 2013) and may build different social paths pro or against the state and authority (Habermas, 1989; Ankersmit, 2002; Urbinati, 2005; 2006), the design of the electoral process in representative democracies suggests the concentration of the discursive effort into the specific timeframe of the election.

What is the situation in Bulgaria? A panoramic view of the context of Bulgarian parliament elections of 2021, reveals the perspective of “rhetoric war” extending in the electoral discourse, in which the mutual accusations, spreading of rumors, and offensive speech prevailed in the dialogue between the right-wing populists, the newly formed liberal political movements and the far-right. Following the series of nation-wide protests that

lead to the overthrow of the populist government of Boyko Borisov by end of the 2020, several new political actors claimed to represent the political inertia of the protests. Political parties like the populist “Ima Takuv Narod” ITN (the leader of which is a famous satirical late-night TV show host) and the newly formed liberals from IMV and PP entered the political scene, stirring the social tension for the upcoming parliament elections. The new parties and the ex-government have engaged into a public discursive conflict, exchanging mutual accusations of corruption, foreign dependencies, and crimes, which migrated to social media, where, among other harmful speech, humor and satire flooded the debate. As the major arising political force at the time ITN was widely recognizable in society with the satiric Slavi’s Show and its screenwriters were forming the leadership in the party, the language of artistic exaggeration, sarcasm, and downright ridicule has gradually been established as a norm in the political discourse, in a sense maintaining the spirit of the protests. This influenced the media behavior of the remaining political actors as well, as they recognized humor as a bridge to the new voters willing political change and incorporated it in their media and electoral appearances. The list of political representatives had also been updated across the political spectrum with the inclusion of different “professional” satirists into the electoral lists of the opposing parties. In the course of the three parliament elections, the following year, however, a consensus for a stable government was not reached, thus technically throwing the country into a loop of political negotiations, operating in the discursive context of a constant electoral competition for the attention of the voters. With the traditionally low percentage of electoral activity in Bulgaria also being a major factor in the electoral context, the motive of the potential elections and instability persisted in public discourse throughout the year and influenced political speech to become increasingly populist in offering solutions for the social and economic turmoil in the country. The political volatility following Covid-19 also brought the massive spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories in the center of the vast social conflict, which also reimagined the public discourse on traditional topics of political division in Bulgarian society, for example the communist past of the country, the political corruption, the issues of the judiciary system, and the role of Russia, NATO, and EU in the country’s contemporary politics. This paved the way for the far-right populists from Vazrazhdane to enter the public discourse with an anti-EU, pro-Russian, and anti-vaccination agenda.

In the dynamics of such discursive collision populism thrived in the digital discourse, which concentrated the majority of public attention to Facebook during the electoral process. It is important to highlight that the abstract convention for what different social media platforms are designed for, e.g. Twitter is for politics, Instagram is for marketing, etc., does not apply for Bulgaria, as data from both Reuters Annual Digital News Report for the last three years and the platform Internet World Stat suggest that around 4 million Bulgarians, or about 82% of the digitally active population, are on Facebook, ergo it is the platform for politics in Bulgaria. The scale of usage also highlights the importance of the platform for the national market, as it is the most recognizable public space, the digital agora hosting the public discourse and a wide variety of social and political interrelations. As it plays an increasingly central role in public debate, the way social media moderates speech online, is proving problematic as it is incapable of systematically identifying what constitutes “appropriate” in the context of the political and social discursive dynamics within the national state. With different politicians and political activists being banned from social media on charges of illegal speech globally (e.g. Trump on Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube after the Capitol riots; the Catalan rapper Pablo Duro after slanderous satire against Spanish monarchy, etc.), it is evident that platforms perform an increasingly editorial role that directly influences the public debate with the restriction of speech or banning users, a phenomenon commonly known to the Bulgarian audience as social media “imprisonment”. Content moderation of smaller language markets like Bulgaria however does not

attract additional effort and resources from the platforms and allows for native-language messages to be modified to bypass the imposed standards and disseminate offensive or radical speech. Linguistically modified content (e.g. intentional spelling mistake or the addition of signs and symbols) can easily bypass automated moderation tools and disguise harmful speech, including under the form of jokes. Thus Bulgarian Facebook hosted a discursive electoral environment with specific communication standards that allowed the dissemination of speech, visual and media content that would other ways be unacceptable for the media or in the public debate in general, thus making the digital debate more attractive in general. And as political humor and satire does not present arguments and conclusions by design but rather euphemistically suggests what reality should be, it became only natural for Bulgarian populists to engage in a Facebook comedic warfare, entertaining voters and influencing public opinions within extremes alike, during the year of parliament elections.

Such perspective for the relations between the political dynamics in the state and the digitalization of public debate en masse is key for initially approaching the issues of weaponizing political humor in populist narratives during Bulgarian parliament elections of 2021. In this paper, I argue that being used as a platform for electoral agitation, Facebook contributed to creating a discursive environment of political scandal that encouraged the rise of right-wing populism and the weaponization of humor and satire for political purposes. Drifts from seriousness in political discourse allow both the right-wing populists to indulge in emotional storytelling that antagonize political opponents and the far-right populists to capitalize on polar social opinions and conspiracies to claim representation of the groups resonating with ideas of radical change of political course. A first step in researching the arguments for that is tracing how populists and the far-right use humor for agitation and what major narratives and tendencies can be outlined, in the aftermath of the parliament elections of 2021.

Research Parameters, Questions, and Methodology

The focus of the work evolves around two research questions that aim to grasp the role of social media political humor as a strategy in political campaigning in Bulgaria and also to identify the major narratives and the contextual issues they bring into the public discourse.

RQ1: What are the major narratives of political humor, used as part of the electoral campaign by Bulgarian populist parties during the parliament elections of 2021?

RQ2: Can a tendency of “weaponizing” humor in populist rhetoric be identified?

Timeframe

The research analyzed below was conducted on three separate 35-day long segments, between 5 March and 25 November 2021, equally dedicated to the respectively held parliament election campaigns. The research period overviews Facebook activity (in posts) of the major political parties and leaders crossing the electoral threshold of 4%, during the election campaign of each of the three separate parliament election tours that were held in Bulgaria during 2021. In terms of the timeframe, the 35-day research segments include the full length of the legitimate electoral campaign and an additional week in the aftermath of the official results announcement. The election campaigns were held respectively: C1—05.03.2021 to 04.04.2021; C2—10.06.2021 to 11.07.2021; C3—14.10.2021 to 14.11.2021, as the second date indicates the day the official results are publicly announced.

The research object is the use of humor and satire on official Facebook pages of the major competing political parties during the three separate parliament election campaigns. Considering the medium of dissemination and the eclectic of the genre of political humor, including the specifics of the different minor terms in the family of the genre like satire, irony, parody, etc. (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009), several different

criteria have been applied for extraction of quantitative data and its classification in categories that are post-factum a subject of qualitative analysis.

1. Criteria for gathering data: (1) Posts found on officially certified Facebook pages of political parties and their respective leaders, authored by either a moderator of the page or the actual person behind the certified profile. (2) Only posts within the selected timeframe and conditions are subject to the research.

2. For separating the intentional use of humor from exaggeration and irony in political speech in general, content analysis by theoretical markers was applied for each separate post. Identified humorous content was then divided into four categories: textual, visual (meme, caricature, etc.), links (3rd party media), hybrid.

3. The body of identified humorous and satirical posts was subjected to additional content analysis for the purpose of investigating political narratives within the system of heroes, villains, and victims (Freinstein et al., 2022) and the emotional triggers in messages.

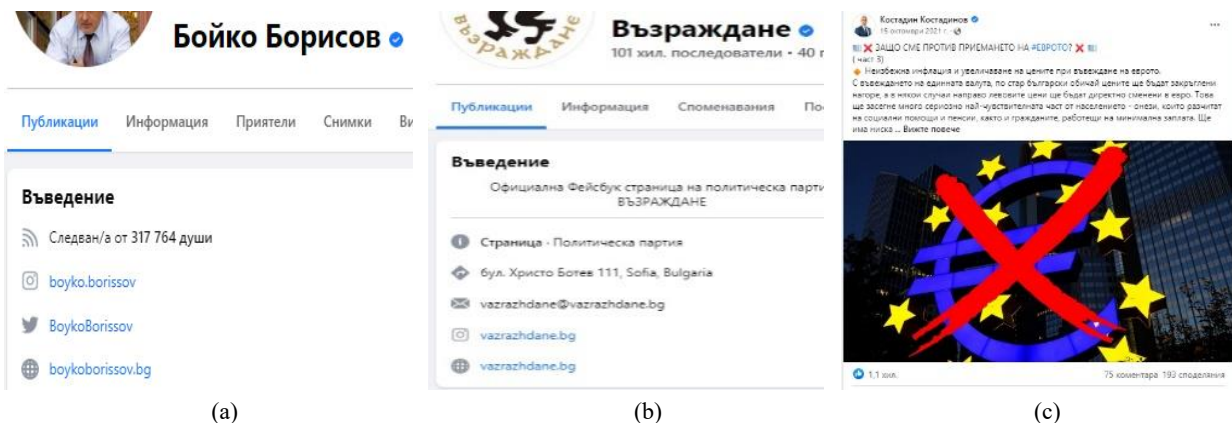


Figure 1. (a) Verified pages of political leaders; (b) parties; (c) official posts.

Limitations

The research is limited to political humor during the specific electoral periods in 2021 and to a single medium of dissemination, thus providing data, sufficient for a narrow interpretation of how Bulgarian populists exploit humorous narratives for agitation in the larger context of global online communication. The research entirely focuses on Facebook posts of political parties and leaders only, narrowing the extend of data only to the social media pages of the official political representation.

Data From the Research

A body of 2,276 political party posts and 1,210 posts of political leaders, or a total of 3,486 Facebook posts, were gathered and processed in the three-month research period. They represent the Facebook activity of the eight major political parties and their respective political leaders, that have reached the 4% electoral threshold in any separate electoral window. Several nuances and deviations in respect to the status of the researched political parties and representatives are considered, for example some parties appear above the 4% threshold in different stages of the three electoral campaigns and some political leaders are more of the official public figures representing political movements, then politicians in the traditional sense. Nonetheless, the social media presence of the latter is included into the general research matrix, due to their direct participation in the electoral processes.

The examined Facebook posts can thematically be separated into common categories as: (1) Agitation for particular political programs being the most common—55.1% of all content, (2) Critique of political opponents—

22.5%, engaging in global political issues—15.4%. The remaining content of 0.9% was identified in the separate category of political humor (in various forms), disproportionately distributed among the political actors. In regard to the number of posts, the Facebook activity of the socialist party, the far-right populists of Vazrazdhane, and the ex-ruling coalition of the populist (GERB) and ethnic-liberals (DPS) amount to over 74% of all content. In regard to Facebook activity of political leaders, however, over 47% of all Facebook posts were from personal profiles, and over 1,000 posts were evenly distributed between the populist leaders of GERB and the far-right Vazrazdhane, which amount to 90% of political leaders’ social media activity in the researched period. In regard to the form of the digital messages, an average of 75% of the posts of populist parties and their respective leaders were hybrid content that included a combination of text, visuals, and multimedia links. For comparison, the results of their other political counterparts averaged at about 55%.

In regard to social media engagement (based on the metrics of reactions and shares under the posts) a significant difference can be seen between posts of political parties and ones of political leaders. Personal profiles of political figures are significantly more engaging on social media where messages attract higher level of user reactions. In certain cases, the number of user reactions under posts differentiates with tens of thousands, due to variables like the public profile and history of the political speaker, which influence popularity of messages. For example, the average user-reaction levels to Facebook posts of Slavi Trifonov, host of a satirical late-night show, and leader of the populist political party ITN, amounted to 16,000, while the average level to other leading political actors during the elections were between 500 and 3,000 reactions.

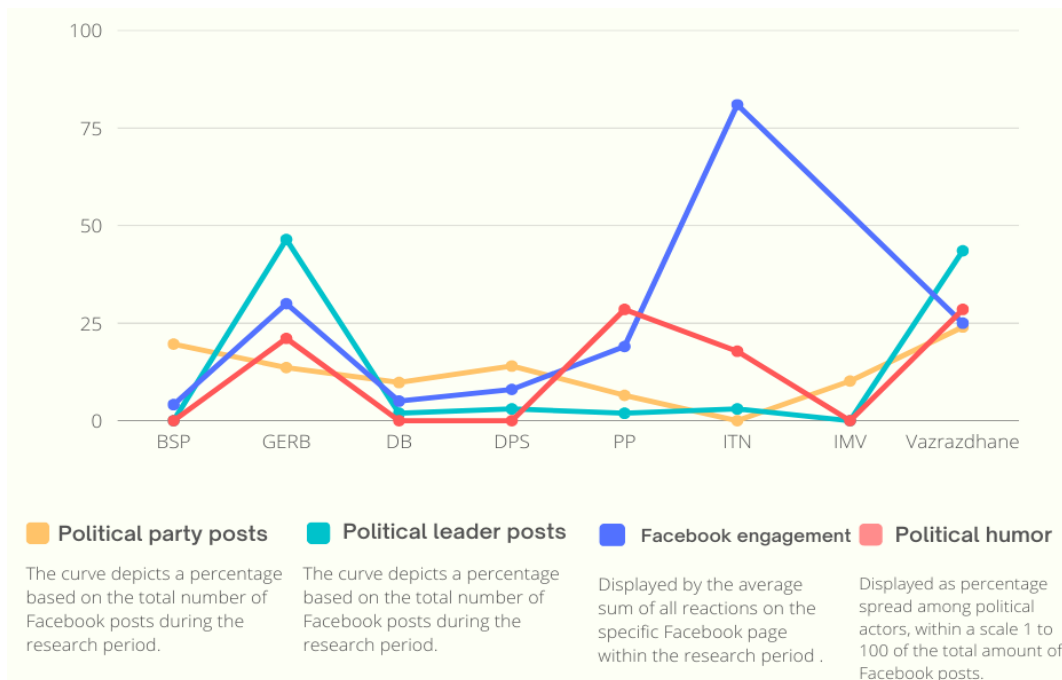


Figure 2. Map of social media activity of political parties and leaders with the variable of political humor included, during the electoral campaign April-November 2021.

In regard to political humor, a total of 28 unique humorous Facebook posts were identified during the research period, as 66% of them inhabit a hybrid form—the combination of text and visuals (mostly caricatures and memes) was the predominant one amounting to 45% (13 posts), followed by text with a link 21% (six posts), and textual-only posts—34% (nine posts). Thematically, four major political narratives can be deduced out of

the identified humor: (1) Critique to the ex-government for corruption and political dependencies (six posts); (2) Agitation for political change (three); (3) Critique of EU and Western liberal politics and ideology (eight); (4) Ad-hominem attacks against figures from the political opposition (11). In regard to the type of political jokes, majority of the researched content was humorous and ironical messages, with about a third of them meeting the broad theoretical marker of the satiric genre, in that they tackled issues in the social and political spheres rather than commenting on qualities of the individual (Caufield, 2008, p. 4). The remaining forms employed the satirical environment to act as personal attacks against different individuals from the political sphere, most commonly the leaders of opposition parties.

A variety of digital forms were examined, including satirical videos and songs, ironical stories, collages and also memes and caricatures, which were the most common form used on Facebook. Results show that, although political humor constitutes a seemingly insignificant percent of the total body of posts, jokes attracted far above the average level user-reactions, evident in both the profiles of populists and those of the new political actors. In regard to the authorship, however, humor and satire were exclusively tools of the populist parties and the new liberal formation PP, while the socialist party (BSP), the democrats (DB), and the ethnic liberals (DPS) were conservative in their social media political marketing, maintaining a serious tone of agitation. Results suggest that political leaders posted more satirical content on their Facebook profiles during the elections, compared to content posted on political parties' official pages. Political comedy however emerges as a shared partisan approach among all populist parties and the far-right, including their respective leaders. Considering the variable of how many total social media posts each political actor had during the election period, for certain political leaders, humor amounted for 5% to 35% of the total content they posted on Facebook.

In regard to parties above the 4% electoral threshold, those that participated in all three separate election campaigns show consistency in social media agitation with humor. Similarly, those participating in only one of the electoral campaigns have also regularly posted humorous content. The map of the electoral results, including the variable of political humor, however, suggest that comedy is an effective strategy for drawing the initial electoral attention, but rapidly exhausts the gathered social inertia, and does not produce consistent electoral results.

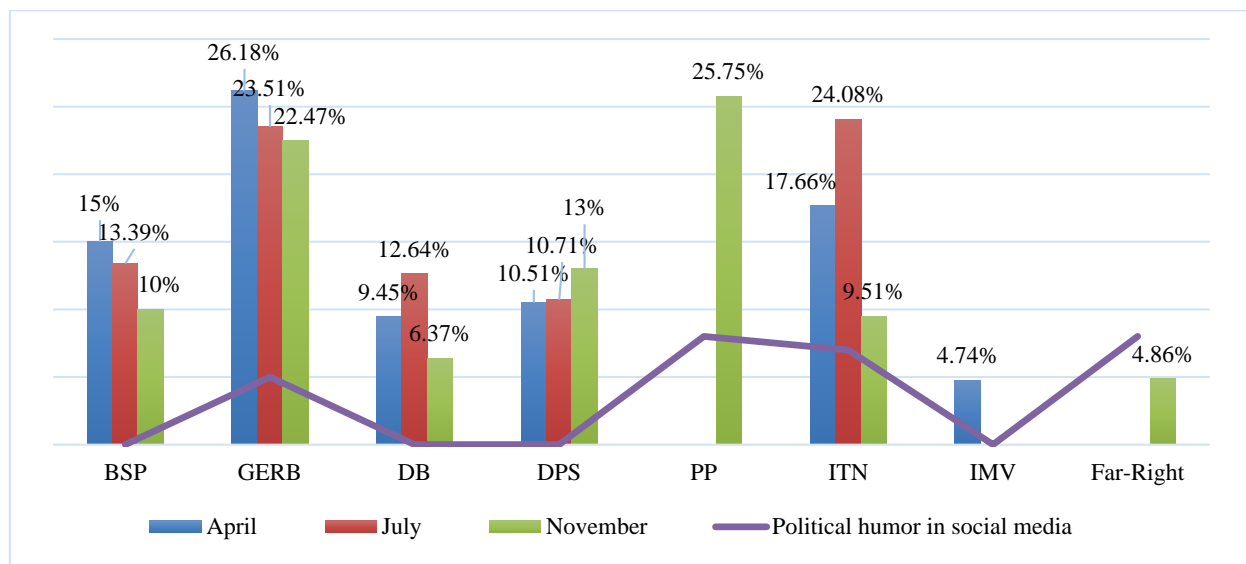


Figure 3. Map of electoral results (an average of 44% voter turnout) with the variable of political humor posted in social media.

The Rise of Bulgarian Right-Wing Populism and Political Humor on Social Media

Data from the research implies several perspectives of how populism dominates humorous and satiric narratives of liberals, right-wings, and their far-right counterparts in the strategic agitation during the parliament elections. Firstly, both the right-wing populists and the new liberal right engaged in social media exchange of mutual accusations of corruption and folly, which were partially rendered in a humorous way. The majority of humorous messages employed cheerful imagery and witty commentary aimed at directly discrediting and antagonizing political opponents, thus working less as satire. A shared motive across right-wing populists humor was that storytelling engaged on judgement of moral issues in both the political and personal behavior of individuals rather than social or cultural critique. In that sense, right-wing populists and liberals relied on mainstream media humor, which operates in the theoretical framework of political humor in democracies, namely the personification of political disapproval, in which political comedy is an anecdote about political representatives and the government, and not a statement against the system itself. A satirical context in the scale of national politics however was employed in narratives against the ex-prime minister Boyko Borisov, that unfolded on both intellectual and emotional level with major accusations of corruption and ties with organized crime. The effects of such political comedy however are short-lived and heuristic (Holbert, 2013) due to its Horatian style satirical design that seeks to engage in a lighthearted and funny way with the audience. It is also the political comedy style that popular media established as a global genre through the late-night comedy entertainment (like *The Daily Show* with John Stewart, Stephen Colbert or Slavi's Show as an equivalent in Bulgaria). The populist inertia of the electoral discourse however never exhausted entirely as it was systematically reignited with humorous reminders of the political tensions, which manifested in “exclusionary laughter” (Philipps, 2019) at the expense of liberals and the ex-governing party. Right-wing populists also employed humorous storytelling for advocating the use of extreme rhetoric as free speech and in discharging political accusation as unserious, as the levels of intensity and severity of mutual political attacks in Facebook remained perpetually high during the entirety of the three electoral campaigns. It is social media however that most significantly contributed to normalizing the use of comedic exaggeration and ridicule in the public discourse, as new political scandals perpetually infiltrated the social agenda via Facebook, where standards, unlike traditional media, allowed for offensive, radical, hate, and defamatory messages to effortlessly be rendered as humor and used for political gains. In that sense, the communication environment stimulated both liberals and right-wing populists to weaponize humor for discursive ad-hominem attacks against political opponents, defending radical rhetoric as humor and imitating the rhetoric standpoint of the satirist as a rebel for the people and defender of free speech. The context of all examined jokes was bound to national politics.

The comparison to how the far-right incorporated humorous stories in social media campaigning however reveals major differences in both the scale of narratives employed in jokes and their target audience. The humorous posts examined on Vazrazhdane's corresponding social media pages were thematically complementary to their established political profile as anti-EU nationalists, fighting against Covid-19 vaccines and the global western elites. Defending a pro-Russian political viewpoint as a critique to liberal democracy and western liberal values, the far-right entered the electoral discourse as vigilantes of conservative democratic freedoms and introduced the culture war rhetoric and conspiracy theories to the public debate. They used memes and caricatures which depict the conflict between orthodox values and the “rotten” liberal west, implying that neoliberal politics present an immense danger to conservative values, thus elevating the local discursive context

to the dimension of global ideology. The far-right employed satirical narratives that predominantly ignored local political interrelations in favor of issues like traditional versus liberal values, distrust in vaccination and the increasing global tension between NATO and Russia. Their pro-Russian political standpoint also caused an array of polar reactions in public discourse, where accusations of radicalism and fascism brought forward a morally charged political debate about the limits of free speech that oblige seriousness and unlaughter. The dispute about the amorphous limits of humor and satire entered the political discourse that was already struggling with disinformation and media propaganda. Employing conspiracy theories for political agitation, the far-right used stories within the concept of unofficial political language, strengthening the hidden dialogue between marginalized ideas and the dominant autocratic discourse, characteristic to the era of Socialism and authoritarian regimes (Badarneh, 2011). Claiming they represented the oppressed, the far-right tried defending calls for political change even at the cost of civil disobedience as freedom of speech, dismissing accusations for radicalism with the repeating discursive reminder of the constant global threat to free speech, political correctness censorship, and a possibility of a dystopian, authoritarian future. While other political actors were engaged in mutual accusations and ridiculing, the far-right entered the local political discourse as an opposition to everyone, suggesting a different geopolitical course for the country. Employing satirical stories of the evil world elite and the moral fall of western democratic establishment, they persistently accused liberals of being American agents and their populist counterparts of being national traitors. The change in contextual scale and focus indicates that the far-right’s satirical narratives try to evoke nationalistic emotions by imitating the function of political humor in authoritarian regimes, where political jokes aim to challenge the authority’s legitimacy to speak the truth and are used to critique the political system itself. Additional argument for that is that unlike the right-wing populists and liberals, who relied on popular media humor, often using caricatures and collages from news media, the far-right populists used only internet memes and jokes, that spread online in the form of rumors and symbols of protest that often lacks authorship, as they depict radical views of delegitimizing power, hence are purposefully not reported in the mainstream media (Davies, 2007). In regard to the media aspect, a tendency of editorial control over “unofficial” humor, e.g. jokes implying political conspiracies or distrust in Covid-19 vaccines, is increasingly noticeable in mainstream digital news media outlets across the EU as well (Vasilev, 2022).

As satire became intrinsic to right-wing populists’ storytelling, serving as a façade to justify the right of the “oppressed” to fight authority with all available resources (Wagner & Schwarzenegger, 2020), populists across Europe increasingly employ narratives featuring heroes, villains, and victims that invite audiences to emotionally relate to accordingly (Freinstein et al., 2022). Such narratives often follow the patterns of rise, fall, and resurrection, that are connected to specific political characters (Oppermann & Spencer, 2018, p. 275). This “characters” function as symbolic avatars of public opinion about the politicians and their inherent meaning extends beyond the immediate context of jokes to the domain of collective folklore, for example in rumors and nicknames³. Considering recent studies underlining the tendency among US and European politicians to exploit a populist modus operandi in trying to mobilize collective emotions around stories of restoring their countries’ greatness (Stengel, MacDonald, & Nabers, 2019; Freinstein & Gadinger, 2020; Wojczewski, 2020), the humorous narratives employed by Bulgarian liberals and right-wings indicate the existence of a similar populist inertia in

³ In the domain of Bulgarian politics nicknames were established as a cultural trend even sometimes in mainstream media. For example, the ex-prime minister Boyko Borisov is widely called “Bace”, coming from big brother, the far-right leader K. Kostadinov, “Kopeikin”, coming from the word for Russian currency, the leaders of ITN and PP with diminutive versions of their names of “Slave” & “Kircho”, etc.

advertising a better future for the country, presented in the satirically exaggerated context of local political rivalry. The far-right however brought additional tension to the electoral discourse with their populist narratives lifting emotional stakes beyond local political events to the scale of international relations and conspiracies, humorously suggesting who the heroes and villains are in a broader global context. Such ideas sustainably resonated with enough people to put Vazrazhdane to parliament with 5% of the vote in November, which remained a strong tendency in 2022 with the party's vote increasing to 10%.

Secondly, in regard to political engagement, data suggest that populists heavily relied on Facebook presence during the electoral campaigns, where a tendency of the increasing effort of individual political actors to influence public opinion personally can be distinguished. It doesn't come as a surprise, that with all the focus on social media politicians attempt to fit in the image of influencers during the electoral campaigns. Although such behavior is not limited to political leaders only, but also applies to any public figure representing the broad political spectrum, the engagement of political leadership with attractive agitation and entertainment underlines the attempt of populists to officialize the implied political messages. This complements strategy for humanizing the image of the populist as a man of the people who also tackles social and political issues in the language of local digital folklore, thus trying to appeal to younger audiences on social media.

As the political crises deepened in 2021 however the prospect for forming a stable government seemed increasingly grim, further fueling public discontent and division on Facebook where the inertia of the pro and anti-government protests of the past year remained. Thus, given the traditionally low voter turnout for Bulgaria (on average about 44% in 2021) on the one hand and the high level of social media use on the other, the prospect that citizens have predominantly preferred to participate discursively in politics via Facebook seemed most plausible. Ergo, considering the existing body of academic research claiming that internet humor and satire reliably engage young audiences with political issues (e.g., Gray et al., 2009; Capri et al., 2018), a major motive behind why populists turn comedians and satirists in social media, also seems to be their attempt to attractively stimulate young and politically inexperienced audiences to vote. In the context of Bulgarian electoral discourse, this occurs through both narratives that dehumanize political opponents as villains and also ones that critique culture, values, or question truth. Thus, populists use the contextual environment to foreground the emotions of indignation and rage, purposefully cultivating militancy in the public discourse (Freinstein et al., 2022), which is being celebrated by the far-right activists globally (Rone, 2022).

This proved a successful social media strategy for right-wing populism, as public attention was dispersing among new political scandals during the electoral periods, which somewhat influenced the curve of the electoral results, as research data also suggest. In this context, this research suggests that humor and satire contribute to populists' success in attracting the initial social attention which then rapidly exhausts and disperses among other “pressing” social issues. It is evident that humorous posts on populist leaders' profiles attract most user reactions (measured in interactions like laughs, likes, and shares), suggesting that the emotional and intellectual exaggeration of political statements appeals to right-wing thinkers and supporters. Additionally, as personal Facebook pages of political leaders were in some cases functioning as their respective party's official page, namely the pages of the populist leader Slavi Trifonov (15% of all posts were humorous or satirical) and the leader of the new liberal formation “PP” Kiril Petkov, the establishment of digital environment in which political ideas are associated with particular public figures was natural. The efforts populists put in appearing more likable to voters with satiric storytelling however backfired in regard to sustainable electoral results. For example, the electoral curve of the populist ITN shows that their initial increase in social trust, that culminated in the party

winning the July elections with 24.08% of the total vote, collapsed in the autumn campaign to under 10%, as they were unable to form a government with the political actors they repeatedly ridiculed and attack on social media. Interestingly, on the other hand, while humor constituted about 35% of the Facebook feed of the leader of the new liberal formation PP, they won their first ever parliament elections in the autumn with 25.65% of the vote, while they were still technically only a Facebook group and not independently registered political party. Similarly, the far-right also dedicated recourses to entertaining audiences on Facebook through their leader’s profile, which was among the most active ones, based on number of posts during the campaigns.

Research data however suggests that it is not the quantity but the quality (or the lack of it) of political humor that stirs the public debate, as despite the seemingly sporadic use of humorous and satirical messages during the campaigns, they managed to draw sufficient media attention to become platforms for populists to speculate about freedom of speech. As right-wing populists tend to rhetorically hyperbolize the image of opponents as vile and totalitarian, they also tend to exaggerate criticism they dislike as being leftist censure rather than as “part and parcel of the meta-discourse of humor” (Rolfe, 2021, p. 104). Being predominantly held in social media, the electoral dialogue in Bulgaria in 2021 repeatedly and deliberately drifted from seriousness, that allowed for speculations, exaggeration, propaganda, and conspiracies to flood the public discourse, bringing the culture war rhetoric to the national political debate. From a collage ironically depicting the heads of the opposition leaders on top of an image of dead American astronauts (Lavchiev, 2021) and a vulgar satirical song against the ex-governing party, to memes with references to concentration camps in Nazi Germany, the majority of political humor and satire during the electoral campaign (24 posts) narrated stories of political and ideological antagonism, that deliberately attracted public attention to anger and hate, thus serving as weapons of legitimate violence (see Rio, 2015) for the assertion of political and cultural identity. The panoramic view of how populists employed humorous and satiric storytelling for Facebook agitation reveals the significant influence of social media over the public discourse in Bulgaria, as the platform standards for free speech⁴ affect social attitudes to both satiric limits and political attention engagement. Results of the electoral 2021 suggest that such effects seemingly contribute to temporarily influencing the electoral dynamics through dispersing the wavering vote between the more entertaining political actors on Facebook, operating in the aforementioned populist mode of storytelling. Considering the different general focus of the current research however the data provided is insufficient for firm conclusions in that perspective.

Lastly, the hybrid social media environment allowed for humor and satire to often be widely indistinguishable from disinformation and hate speech, which had already contaminated the online public discourse in Bulgaria. Despite the implicit features of satire, like artistic exaggeration and provocation, which do not necessarily oblige amusement and laughter (Gray et al., 2009), or the principal lack of intent in satire to mislead or lie to its audience (Barclay, 2018, p. 30), populists’ political jokes were often publicly argued about as arguments of propaganda, and in some contexts as offensive or slanderous speech. Bulgarian society was divided by polar opinions about the international political tension, stirring around Ukraine in the end of 2021, which reflected on the public debate where both the right-wings populists and their far-right counterparts started dismissing any ideas they disliked with the argument of it being either Russian or American propaganda. In that regard, political humor and satire collaterally contributed to the militant polarization of the public debate, as they

⁴ Although several humorous cases, within the research period, were subject to public criticism in different media, none of the identified political posts was banned or suspended by Facebook, implying that the platform’s speech standards are equally influential in the process of constituting social norms for acceptable public debate, as the national political and cultural tradition.

do not inform through what is left unsaid, but with what is presupposed, thus imitating political propaganda in exploitation of both facts and fiction for suggesting what truth and reality should be. This allowed for right-wing populists to also speculate on deciphering the meta-discourse of jokes as Russian propaganda, and as an excuse to distract public attention from their political blunders, accusing the socialists and the far-right of foreign political dependencies instead. The implication of such motives in political narratives resonates on personal level with majority of Bulgarians, that traditionally remain divided in assessment of the heritage left from the socialist past of the country. In regard to satiric limits, the research suggests that Bulgarian populists tend to foreground emotional narratives in order to politicize the cultural and historical debate in society, inviting the clash of polar public opinions to discursively unfold on the level of emotion norms. In that sense, during the different stages of the electoral campaigns, both Bulgarian right-wing populists and the far-right were deliberately using humor and satire in social media as a strategy for stirring liberal and conservative electoral emotions by exaggerating local political interrelations up to the scale of the clash of global culture wars. If this can be considered an attempt to trigger the potential of emotions to site emancipatory, transformative politics (Hutchison & Bleiker, 2020), then by entering a populist mode Bulgarian political actors strategically embed humorous narratives in agitation as a part of a larger scale “e-tactic”, also functioning as a form of online troll-politics, that weaponize humor and satire for both “defensive” and “aggressive” political maneuvering via social media.

Conclusions and Discussion

The research gives contextual insights on how Bulgarian right-wing populism and the far-right exploit humorous and satirical narratives in social media political agitation during the course of the parliament elections of 2021. With the major motive that the electoral discourse was predominantly held in the meta-reality of Facebook communication, Bulgarian populists relied on humor and satire to provoke electoral emotions with stories of political antagonism, mostly evident in the social media activity of political leaders. They vigorously indulged in the rhetoric of mutual ridicule, hiding behind the avatar of social media satirists to engage into exaggerated, offensive discursive confrontations, that reduced the political discourse to the level of internet slang. Imitating detachment from power, populists predominantly employed stories that dehumanize political opponents under the guise of “speaking truth to power” and free speech. Political jokes of the right-wing and the liberals however are more humorous in nature rather than satirical and are purposefully exploited for causing reputational damage as they involved rumors, speculations and exaggerated accusations of folly, amorality and corruption, rather than commenting on general social or political issues. The far-right, on the other hand, employed conspiracy theories in satirical narratives, capitalizing both on the traditional social tensions in Bulgarian society and the crisis of values and leadership in the Europe, to suggest critique to western culture, political and ideological values, thus functioning less as personal attacks and more as a provocative cultural comment.

In regard to RQ1, considering the context of discursive confrontation during the format of parliament elections, humorous narratives were a reoccurring motive in the public discourse that maintained the perpetual populist attempt to mobilize the public emotions against “villainous” political opponents, through accusations for corruption, ties with organized crime, and foreign political dependencies. The content moderation deficits in Bulgarian Facebook allowed for humor also function as ad-hominem attacks, thus imposing the informal, hateful, and radical speech as an unofficial standard in the public discourse. Unsurprisingly, the liberal right also indulged in social media agitation through ridicule, incorporating stories for reviving the country’s greatness at the expense of political enemies in caricatures and witty texts. The findings in this research correspond to the global tendency

emerging among the right-wing and liberal politicians to take advantage of the populist inertia in political storytelling of national greatness (e.g., Browning, 2019; Stengel et al., 2019; Wojczewski, 2020), with the discursive effects being seemingly amplified on social media due to the communication environment influence over the discursive context and rhetorical limits, as well as users’ behavior. The deliberate exploitation of humor and satire for populist storytelling as electoral strategy in social media underlines the ability of right-wing populism to adapt its repertoire to the perpetually developing conditions and processes of cultural and identity building (Abrahamsen et al., 2020; Freistein et al., 2022). This also affects the behavior of the far-right, which elevated its satiric narratives out of the local context to the scale of global politics and ideology, which collaterally contributed to their electoral results, representing their claim of politically representing the oppressed social minorities, e.g. anti-vaxxer, Russophiles, etc.

In regard to RQ2, the research implies that political humor on Facebook, during the electoral campaigns in 2021, was predominantly employed as a strategic weapon by populists, for distracting public attention to partisan political interpretations, in hope of securing future political and electoral gains. Political humor was embedded into narratives pursuing both the discursive purpose to discredit political individuals and aid agitation for mobilizing the electoral vote around the partisan interpretation of global political issues and conspiracies, that ultimately suggested the need of radical social change. This indicates that political humor was widely exploited as a tool of populism and political opportunism to stir polar public tensions and establish a militant electoral discourse, fueling the exchange of radical speech and ideas, thus deepening the social division about issues of national and global politics and ideology.

Although the design of the research frame supports mainly contextual conclusions, the findings contribute to the discussion about the increasing significance of social media in public interrelations, especially in regard to humor and satire, in their role of discursive technologies for attracting social attention and propagating non-mainstream and radical ideologies. The use of social media for political and electoral dialogue contributes to a general drift from seriousness in the public discourse, where identity, emotions, and the artificially maintained militant environment of meta-reality influence meaning-making. The analysis of the Bulgarian context supports the concept that populists reproduce the dichotomy of good people versus evil elites on emotional level (Freinstein et al., 2022) via humorous narratives on Facebook. The examined effects however are rather a symptom of the larger phenomenon of digitalizing global politics, in which right-wing populism actively adapts to the technological trance today’s societies are submerged into, and strategically exploit the inherent emotionality and playfulness of humor and satire, in order to pursue political dividends, including ones that are radical in nature.

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