USAGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE PROCESS OF ELECTION CAMPAIGNS AND A VIEW TO TURKISH REPUBLIC OF NORTHERN CYPRUS GENERAL ELECTIONS – 28 JULY 2013

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ABSTRACT

Policy, based on control mechanism the regular living of community, reached different dimensions in today's communication conditions. It is not possible to sever the policy from communication. This situation took yet more different turn by diversifying of means of communication.

The person or institutions, are in touch with political communication, benefit from various communication methods for be able to manage the perceptions of the mass be able to do behavioral change upon own request and be able to affect the target groups. “Election Campaigns” are one of the first constituents come to mind when you say political communication. It is also important “what you tell” a “how you tell” to target group in communication. Management methods of the political communication, underwent change on several counts along with the introduction of internet technology to our lives. Policy, became digital by the system named as “Social Media”, makes possible interactive, open bilateral communication process. Being the social media faster and cheaper than traditional means of communication and using the social media densely by electorate, gain the upper hand to political parties in the executive process the election campaigns.

In the 2013 Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus Social media strategies of National Unity Party and Republican Turkish Party-Joint Forces, which are two parties playing an active role in country government, were examined general elections process. By results of examination, viewpoint to social media of National Unity Party was shaped within the frame of unilateral communication strategy and it was occurred cyclically and void of a distinct strategy. In contrast to National Unity Party, viewpoint to social media of Republican Turkish Party-Joint Forces is long-termed and integrated with traditional communication workings.

Keywords: political communication, election campaigns, social media.

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INTRODUCTION

It is not possible to separate the politics from the communication. That is the reason why the people or entities being in political communication make use of various communication methods in the process of managing the perceptions of the target audience and creating the desired change of attitude and behavior. One of these is the election campaigns. The people or entities who try to persuade their target audience with the communication campaigns have obtained the opportunity to reach their audience in a faster, more effective and cheaper way by virtue of the advantages provided by the internet technologies as a result of the technological advancements day by day. The social media, besides enabling dissemination of messages and cooperation with the target audience, provide the political parties with new shareholders as well as the opportunity for direct communication and interaction with these shareholders in the process of managing the political communication. By virtue of the social media applications developing new, rapid, interactive, participative and creative methods and strategies, the political parties reach better results in the phases of persuasion, rallying supporters, defense, reputation management, and information management.

The relationship between the election campaigns and the social media, which constitute the main axis of this study, was scrutinized within the scope of the sample of July 28, 2013 - Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus General Elections. For the study, the social media profiles of the National Union Party and the Republican Turkish Party-United Forces which are the two most powerful parties of TRNC were examined, and how effectively they use the social media in the political communication process was determined. Due to the fact that the country is not a well-developed one, and that not so many significant advances have been encountered in terms of institutionalization, it was observed that the outlooks of the political parties in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus on the social media progress slowly in a shallow area.

1. POLITICAL COMMUNICATION, ELECTION CAMPAIGNS AND SOCIAL MEDIA RELATIONSHIP

There are many definitions being made about the political communication. It is possible to define the political communication as "the one-way or two-way communication that a political opinion or organ continuously improves using the advertisement, propaganda and public relations techniques according to the requirements of the time and conjuncture in order to ensure the public confidence and support within the political system it is acting" (Uslu, 1996, p:790).

Steven Chaffee, in the book named “Political communication”, defines it shortly and briefly as "The role played by the communication in the political process" (Tokgöz, 2008, p:109). Atabek on the other hand, points out that defining the political communication is difficult, and states that the political communication which is defined as the "voter persuasion paradigm" by the academics is far from encompassing all of the processes and actors indicated by this notion, and that the political communication literature is carried out under the sway of the "electoral communication" (Atabek,
As stated by Atabek, the political communication studies generally carried out and perceived as "electoral communication" by the political parties are intensified during election campaign periods and plays an important role in management of the communication process with the voters.

By virtue of the communication through the election campaigns, a connection is formed between the objectives of the candidates and the behaviors of the voters, and a bridge is built between the hopes and dreams of the voters and the studies of the candidates (Uztuğ, 1999, p:19). Political parties can convey their political messages to a larger mass through election campaigns, measure the public expectations by public opinion surveys, create the current agenda according to the current conjuncture, and gain advantages against the political rivals.

When we look in general, although the newspapers and televisions provide a means to reach the masses for political communication in today's process, now the conventional media is not sufficient for communication with the masses. Today, besides being dissatisfied with the information flow from the politics to the public sphere, the people want to interact, obtain the right to speak, and to become empowered. The conventional media does not allow for such communication due to its dialogical structure. The conventional media is composed of the messages transmitted from a single source to the majority. However, the electronic communication means, thus the internet, provides one-to-one dialogue opportunity. (Lilleker, p:73).

By virtue of the internet the political communication process, while enabling the users affect the media, eliminates the distances by forming instant connections and expands so as to zero the response times.

In today's world where the communication management methods become diversified, the power of internet, thus the social media is incontrovertible. The social media performs numerous functions in the political communication management process such as providing new shareholders for political parties, creating direct communication and interaction with these shareholders, enabling dissemination of messages, creating networks, building up trust, cooperation with the target audience, and ensuring participation and adaptation etc.

We confront with the social media in many areas nowadays. Today hundreds of books about the importance of social media are being written, and conferences are being held by the specialists about how effectively the social media should be used as a communication campaign method. By virtue of the two-way communication provided by the social media, while it is becoming possible to carry out an interactive communication with the users/target mass, also various advantages in terms of time and financial resources are being obtained for reaching and convincing the target audience.

By means of the social media-based applications which are developing new, fast,
creative, interactive, participative and free media, methods and strategies allowing for participating in the content, besides designing attention-grabbing and persuasive messages that are capable of satisfying the needs and expectations of the target mass, the institutions attain the success with the new contents that they produce taking in to account the messages that the target audience is involved. Thus, the functions inherent in the communication such as persuasion, rallying supporters, defense, reputation management, and information management are being reshaped (Zafarmand, 2010, p.57).

When we examine the data about the use of social media, we see that 2.5 billion people around the World use the internet. 1.8 billion of these users have accounts in the social media networks. The ratio of the internet users to the entire population is 45%. There are more than 35 million internet users and 36 million active Facebook accounts in Turkey (Internet and Social Media Usage Statistics 2014, http://www.dijitalajanslar.com/internet-ve-sosyal-medya-kullanici-istatistikleri-2014, Access Date: February 19, 2014).

In order to make sure that their political discourse is reached to the masses and to persuade them, the political parties the primary objectives of which are to be able to express themselves to the voters by reaching them, to earn the vote of the electors by convincing the voter of their legitimacy, and to come to power, are taking their places in the social network platforms where masses spend more time with each passing day. Especially the young electorates use the social networks intensely, and by virtue of these networks, the social media functions as a cheaper, fast and effective communication means for the political parties.

We encountered with the "social media" as a political communication method for the first time in the Presidential Elections held in 2008 in USA. The Democrat Party candidate Barack Obama, rather than the other mass communication means, used the social media more rapidly and effectively as a political communication during the election campaign process. The election campaign that was blended with a successful social media strategy by Barack Obama achieved a significant breakthrough in use of information and communication technologies in politics, and became a source of inspiration for many leaders around the World, and thus the social media took its place in the political communication literature.

The political parties which use the digital media in order to accomplish their goals, introduce themselves, provide news and information about the party, and to obtain information about the messages of the similar political players, use this media either continually as a political communication means or periodically for the purpose of affecting the voter behavior during the political campaign period.

The political parties, using the internet technology, can determine the trends or expectations of the electorates more accurately. Especially promoting in the social network websites (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest etc.), they meet with their voters. The digital media also creates a faster and more active interaction environment for the political parties during communication with their voters. Thus, by virtue of the
social media technologies, the speed and quality of the political communication increase.

Since the social media is means which should be managed professionally, the political parties and leaders should consider certain issues when using this media. Effective and proper use of the social media interests not only the political parties but also the leaders. Also the political party leaders should be active in the social media, and should get in one-to-one contact with their electorate.

Each of the social media channels can serve for a different communication purpose. For example; while the contents about the party/leader take their place rather for promotion purposes on Facebook, the Twitter enables its users to use a warmer language and to directly communicate with their followers. Since each social media channel has its specific method of use, the parties and leaders carrying out the election campaigns should also consider these issues.

The social media is composed of the interaction-based, online and sharing-oriented networks. The voters are able to interpret, evaluate, develop and criticize any information through the social media with sharing-oriented online communication channels. This in turn makes the political parties' communication with their voters more transparent and trustworthy in terms of political accountability principle.


The early general elections held in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus on July 28, 2013 witnessed the election campaign race between the country's two parties closest to the power, the National Union Party (UBP) and the Republican Turkish Party-United Forces (CTP-BG). Apart from these two parties, two other parties are represented in the TRNC Republican Assembly under the names of the Democrat Party and the Socialist Democracy Party. The CTP-BG, the first political party of TRNC, and the UBP, established by Rauf Denktaş who is the founder president of TRNC and a former president, have been in power by turns in the political history of the Turkish Cyprus which has experienced 11 general elections since 1976. The Republican Turkish Party was established by a group of Cypriot intellectuals, tradesmen and businessmen in 1970, and while preparing for the 2003 elections, opening its list to the central right, social democrat and liberal sections in order to achieve a solution based on the Annan Plan renamed as the CTP-United Forces. UBP, on the other hand, was established by the former TRNC president Rauf Denktaş in 1975.

The UBP which had assumed the task to form the government with its vote rate of 43.97% as a result of the general elections held in 2009, coming the terms with the opposing parties due to the problems occurred within the party during almost 4-year ruling term, took the decision to go for an early elections within the frame of the decision taken by the General Assembly of the Parliament in 30 May. The general elections are being held once in every 5 years according to the current electoral system. Since the general elections were scheduled to an earlier time, the election campaign studies covered a short period of two months as well. Furthermore,
It would be fruitful to look at how the UBP and the CTP-BG managed their political communication campaigns over the social media channels during the two-month election campaign period. First of all, it would be better to indicate that the population of the country was determined as 294,906 according to the data of 2011, and therefore the face-to-face communication is still the most effective communication type. When we look at the frequency of the social media use, we see that recognition of the power of the social media by both parties does not go long way back. Especially CTP-BG created an account on Twitter for the first time in August of 2011, subsequently in January of 2012 accessed to Facebook. The social media policies of UBP come up to more recent dates. The party created its profile on Twitter in June 2013, and on Facebook in July of the same year. About video sharing, CTP-BG started to use the YouTube network in July 2011, and shared numerous video contents through said website up to now. UBP started to use the YouTube one moth prior to the elections, as it is the case in the Facebook and Twitter examples. And the content sharing is limited to 3 videos. This means that; the UBP started to take part in the social media after taking the early elections decision. As can be understood from this example, the social media policy of the UBP is election campaign-oriented and tactical rather than strategic. Also the UBP, upon the announcement that the election results are in favor of CTP-BG, suspended its studies in the social media. As from the July, it paused sharing on its Facebook profile, and stop sharing on its Twitter profile in July 2013, nevertheless it re-started sharing in May before the upcoming local elections, and re-paused in June. This shows that UBP does not have a consistent strategy about the social media, and it uses this field only periodically/tactically and for propaganda purpose.

When the content of the shares are examined, the shares of UBP were mainly for the purpose of introduction of the candidates, and sharing the party program and the statements of the party chairperson with the public opinion. It was seen that especially the brochures prepared for the members of the parliament were on the Facebook platform, and the statements of the party chairperson were on the Twitter. CTP-BG on the other hand, tried to use the social media more effective compared to the UBP, and the developments about the party were shared regularly with the voters through Facebook and Twitter. The CTP-BG, rather than using the social media as a seasonal election campaign tool, regards it as an important step of the political communication studies, and shares contents accordingly. The shares cover all kinds of studies of the party, and these studies are shared with the followers as effective messages. The photograph and video images are utilized frequently, and social media-specific designs are used for the contents shared through the Facebook. The Twitter shares are supplied with the visual contents, and the visitors are redirected to the official webpage of the party via the links on the platform. Generally the social media strategy of the CTP-BG is long termed and it is carried out integrated with the conventional communication studies.
CTP-BG, which believes that politics should be done in the streets but which for convincing the young and social media users uses this area quite effectively especially in the electoral periods, thinks that the social media is the most effective and the easiest way in announcing the news and the activities of the party. The social media which is a useful area for conveying the campaign materials to the electorates during the electoral periods and for obtaining immediate returns functions as a big laboratory for putting out a feeler for CTP-BG. The party believes that the "Target Individual" should be focused on instead of the "Target Mass" and that, for this reason, even though the social media is a very important means, since it is not a means that can be controlled, it is necessary to get prepared when using this area. (Akın, interview, August 2014)

The social communication campaigns are composed of not only the parties' promotion studies but also the political communication studies of the political party leaders make contribution to this process. Especially the political communication conducted by Obama through Twitter during 2009 elections is the case in point. When we investigate the social media performances of the political party leaders of TRNC, the following results are revealed:

- The leaders of both parties take their place on Twitter.
- Though the Chairperson of the CTP-BG Özkan Yorgancıoğlu participated in the Twitter before the UBP Chairperson İrsen Küçük, his shares are less compared to Küçük.
- While the UBP Chairperson İrsen Küçük uses the Twitter for propaganda purposes by sharing the political statements with the public opinion; the CTP-BG Chairperson Özkan Yorgancıoğlu makes more personal sharings rather than the party discourse and uses an intimate language. This gives the impression that Yorgancıoğlu manages his own account while Küçük receives support from a social media specialist.
- While İrsen Küçük does not support his shares with visual contents, it is seen that Yorgancıoğlu shares photograph is all his tweets.
- İrsen Küçük paused his tweets after the general elections (he posted several shares as of September 2013), on the other hand Yorgancıoğlu has not posted any share after March 2013. This shows that Küçük used the Twitter during the election campaign period, but it is not the case for Yorgancıoğlu. Yet Yorgancıoğlu made a pause in his shares on Twitter approximately four months before the elections.

In brief, the Republican Turkish Party-United Forces which carried out a political communication campaign that exhibited more strategy, continuity and consistency through the social media compared to the National Union Party adorned its campaign with various visual materials and managed its social media accounts integrated with the conventional communication means. Also the CTP-BG which conducted, though not very effective, a more effective social media campaign compared to the UBP in the 2009 general elections partially better interpreted the demands and expectations of the society which have become digitalized in a period dating back to 2013. When assessed in general, the political communication atmosphere in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus takes place in a shallower area and effect when compared to Turkey,
and this is caused due to the fact that the country is not highly developed, that not much efforts are being exerted in terms of institutionalization, and that the importance placed on professionalism is low.

When we look at the results of the early general elections held in July 28, 2013, we see that neither party reached a majority sufficient for coming to power alone. For this reason, the President Derviş Eroğlu assigned the duty of forming the government to Özkan Yorgancıoğlu, Chairperson of the CTP-BG that gained the highest number of parliament members, and as a result of the negotiations CTP-BG preferred to form a coalition government with the Democrat Party-National Forces.

3. CONCLUSION

In the political communication management process, the social media performs numerous functions for the political parties such as providing new shareholders, creating direct communication and interaction with these shareholders, enabling dissemination of messages, networking, creating trust, cooperation with the target mass, participation and adaptation etc. The social media is based on interaction and this interaction takes place in a sharing-oriented way. Those conducting the political communication campaigns, without ignoring the aforementioned, should carry out a communication campaign which is open to dialogue and exhibits continuity and where each network is managed actively and effectively.

The political parties should make use of the social media in order to render their communication with the voters more transparent and trustworthy for the sake of accountability. One-way communication contradicts with the structure of the social media, and use of this area solely for propaganda purposes will not bring success in the long run.

While the social media enables the user to become the subject, it eliminates the distances and it is based on the two-way communication. Within the context of the 28 July Early General Elections, the social media communication of the two most powerful parties of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is investigated within the scope of this study. On account of the fact that the country is not highly developed and not much efforts are being exerted in terms of institutionalization, and also that the importance placed on professionalism is low, the importance being placed on the social media is partial and this area is in the development stage. Although the UBP's outlook to the social media is seasonal, for now it is for propaganda purposes. Interruption in an area like social media is not a correct tactic, and it harms the continuity factors. The fact that the UBP cannot integrate much with the young can be asserted among the reasons of such approach of the UBP. Yet the Party is positioned as conservative/traditionalist due to its mission and the perception it has created among the voters.

CTBG carried out a more strategic social media campaign compared to the UBP. The party's addressing to a younger mass compared to UBP, exhibiting a view integrated with Europe, and acting with the young within a visionary political concept frame etc. are the reasons behind this. Its outlook towards communication is
progressing in line with a two-way and continuity-based approach. The social media accounts of the party are managed by the employees working in the press office, and the employees are regularly given trainings about the social media.

What the UBP should do is to better understand the society the population of which becomes younger gradually, and its expectation as well, and to reach the digitalized society with a communication strategy that is open to dialogue and exhibits consistency, through the communication means they use. The CTP-BG however, though trying to effectively use the social media within limited means, should implement an interaction and sharing-oriented transparent communication plan with enriched content that will make the two-way communication more effective.
Usage of social media in the process of election campaigns and a view to Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus general elections – 28 July 2013

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