

“Save Romania Union” and Social Media Campaigns: Presidential Elections 2019 and Parliamentary Elections 2020

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Abstract

In Bucovina, academic societies and cultural societies from Cernăuți played an In today's society, social media plays a vital role in the communication power that people own. More and more, online social media is used for politics and election campaigns in order for politicians to be more in touch with their voters. In this paper, I aim to analyse the social media campaigns run on Facebook by Save Romania Union for two election periods: Presidential Elections 2019 and Parliamentary Elections 2020. To better understand this issue, I selected Facebook posts and used qualitative research methods to understand these two campaigns' political aims fully. Overall, in the conclusion section of this paper, you can see how politicians use social media in political campaigns and how important it is for this political party to express their political vision and aspirations.

Keywords: *Save Romania Union, Facebook, social media, electoral period.*

Introduction

Social media has become a part of people's lives and even a social force shaping communication, interactions, and social behaviour. In such dynamics, the political dimension has become an active presence like entertainment, e-commerce, or science. In the last decade, this online environment began to be increasingly approached by political parties. In the case of Romania, online political communication is increasingly intense during election campaigns (Gherghina & Lutai, 2023). In this article, I chose to analyse the behaviour of Save Romania Union (SRU) during the last two electoral campaigns: The presidential Elections in November 2019 and the Parliamentary Elections in December 2020.

According to Open Democracy (Can, 2016), the SRU is a party of “neoliberals, environmentalists, left-liberals, true social democrats, Christian democrats, NGO supporters and minority rights activists”. These characteristics are relevant for any researcher of this type because they can emphasise their own

type since they are not the main focuses of the political formation and, therefore, how it outlines and promotes the program of action.

In his article, McLaughlin (2016) claims that this party is one of a “diverse group of activists, academics and people from business and the arts, which is derived from a Save Bucharest move to protect the city’s historic buildings”.

The purpose of the present research is to examine and analyse the way in which the SRU political formation used social media in the current framework of Facebook, in the campaigns carried out in 2019 for the Presidential elections and in 2020 in the framework of the Parliamentary elections. In the following sections of this paper, the main existing research directions in the literature regarding the use of social media in political electoral campaigns, the research design for the selected case study, as well as the results of the analysis regarding the SRU’s online electoral communication in the last two rounds of elections in Romania will be presented.

Literature Review

Existing literature has identified and analysed the advantages and disadvantages of using social media platforms in political communication. Somehow, naturally, the online environment has facilitated the level of personalisation of political messages. The use of social media algorithms, which were previously used in online advertising, allowed political parties to target their messages in a much more efficient way based on interests, personal search history on online platforms, regular views, etc. (Bode & Vraga, 2018). Using these algorithms for targeting political messages led to improved electoral results and the efficiency of campaign efforts (Hillygus & Shields, 2008).

Another advantage of online political communication is that online platforms provide political parties with the framework to build online communities of supporters. Such online social constructs offer three potential advantages for political parties: real-time communication with supporters, organising events such as election rallies and encouraging voter turnout (including using user data to identify undecided voters) (Bode & Vraga, 2018).

Online voter mobilisation is not an exclusive operation where only political parties have the initiative. Ordinary citizens can also use online platforms to express their own political views and promote specific candidates. This type of citizen electoral initiative in the online environment has the advantage of facilitating organic political participation that can be defined as a bottom-up democracy (Zúñiga *et al.*, 2014).

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However, social media is not a panacea in electoral mobilisation. Even though an increase in participation in electoral campaigns can be observed, an increase in voter participation has not been observed (Bond *et al.*, 2012). Ultimately, those who were already politically active traditionally are the same ones who tend to use social media for political purposes. However, this does not mean a broadening of the electoral pool.

On the list of disadvantages are the creation of “filter bubbles” and the spread of misinformation. In the first case, it is about the tendency to expose social media users only to information and opinions that reinforce their own beliefs and prejudices (Pariser, 2011). With this, voters cannot access different electoral programs or debates. Thus, political polarisation can be accentuated, a phenomenon that manifests in traditional political communication forms through the written press, radio, and television.

Regarding the second disadvantage, online networks are a source of misinformation during election campaigns (Guess *et al.*, 2020). The exposure of social media users to these campaigns is an issue that could have implications for a fundamental process of democracy. However, electoral manipulation through disinformation is not an invention of social media.

The relationship between the electorate and the party leaders is noted in several reference works from the specialised literature (Aarts *et al.*, 2013; Fernandez-Vazquez & Somer-Topcu, 2019; Garzia, 2017) support in their works the importance of the existence of a consensus between the electorate and the party leader and, at the same time the importance of identifying the voters with the values and beliefs of the political leaders in whose hands they offer political support.

The idea of marketing the leader using social media is not new but has been studied by several scholars. In their research, Sihi and Lawson (2018) claim that political leaders use social media to promote themselves and establish a better connection between themselves and future possible clients (voters in the present case). Also, the credibility of the leader was invoked, offering it as an example for others, the possibility of sharing expertise and knowledge with their followers and engaging them in interaction.

Regarding the loyalty between the voters and the political parties they support, in the existing literature, the emphasis is on the relationship between the leaders and the electorate, more precisely, the existence of continuous communication between the two groups, and the sure votes come precisely from

these voters whom they feel in contact with the leaders of the political formations they support (Andre *et al.*, 2012; Coleman, 2005; Hardin, 2008).

Also, Folke and Rickne (2020) claim that the leader's public appearances and the presentation of his own point of view on various topics are significant; thus, the electorate identifies more with the leaders. An unexpected thing is visible in the work of the two; namely, the elements from the personal lives of political leaders can lead to the increase of voters' trust in the political parties they represent; more precisely, the more voters know about the elected, the more likely they are more loyal and supportive, they are growing.

According to Kalsnes (2016), dialogue with voters represents a much-desired element in political interactions. A new dynamic in politics is being pursued, a more transparent connection between elected officials and voters, and in the present case, this interaction is not very successful.

Gilardi *et al.* (2022) claim that a political agenda is a main tool in any type of election, and how it is formulated and delivered to voters can be extremely important for the outcome of the election. In this whole process of communicating the political agenda, social media plays an essential role through the impact it can have on voters, adding extra complexity to the process of setting the agenda. Yang *et al.* (2016) also refer to the importance of social media in communicating the political agenda and training the masses to support and adopt those critical points on the party's political agenda.

Research Methods

According to Agerpres (2019), in January 2019, the total number of people who had a Facebook account in Romania was 9.8 million, almost half of the total population at that time. At the same time, the number of people who had an Instagram account barely exceeded 700,000 users. Moreover, a report published by Statista (2023) in March 2023 shows that the total number of Facebook users reached 12.24 million. The data presented above can confirm that the Facebook platform represents an online space with a significant resonance in terms of online communication.

This paper selected the last two electoral campaigns in Romania: the elections for the President of Romania (December 2019) and the elections for the Parliament of Romania (November 2020). The motivation for choosing the two electoral campaigns is related to their impact at the national level. Both types of elections directly impact how the state is to be governed: the President appoints the future prime minister, and the Parliament validates the government team that the appointed prime minister presents together with a government program.

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In this research, I propose to answer the following research questions:

- What main themes are addressed in the two campaigns (comparison 2019-2020)?
- What kind of posts attract the public's attention the most?
- How is the interaction between the party and the voters manifested in the posts on Facebook, and how frequent is this?

To answer these research questions, I focus on how SRU built its strategy for the two campaigns and used Facebook as a communication tool, following what information their posts contained and how voters reported on them. For this purpose, the relevant data from SRU's Facebook page were selected.

The data used to answer these research questions were obtained after analysing the SRU Facebook page between October 2019-January 2020 and November 2020-February 2021. In my analysis, I wanted to see the number of likes, comments, and shares for each post from the abovementioned period. At the same time, I also looked at the number of posts depicting the party leader and, at the same time, at the number of posts where the party answers voters' comments.

The reason why I chose to analyse the posts over four months is a well-founded one: I wanted to observe the posts that were published one month before the elections, then the posts from the month that coincides with the presidential or parliamentary elections, then two more post-election months, to see if there is a difference between the posts before and during the elections.

Finally, I performed a content analysis on each post to determine the category in which they can be placed, as follows:

- Proposals – all posts that provide information about the political agenda of the party
- Campaign – all posts that provide information about the ongoing electoral campaign
- Opposition – all posts that provide information about opposition parties
- Supporters – all the posts that provide information about the people and personalities who declare themselves active voters of the party
- Actions – all the posts that provide information about the public actions in which party members took part and, at the same time, what the party managed to do, the political successes.

The categories mentioned above will, among others, be the subject of the analysis of this research, allowing the possibility of observing the impact of each category on the sympathisers.

Results and Analysis:

Following the collection of data from the posts on SRU's Facebook page in the two mentioned time intervals, the following results were obtained.

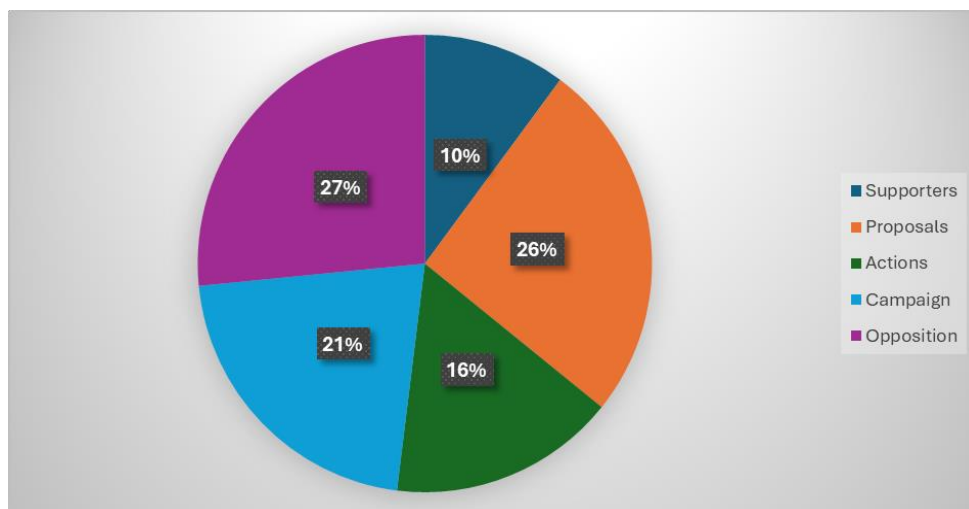
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS- NOVEMBER 2019:

Regarding the social media activity of the studied political group, for the Presidential Elections of November 2019, we used a series of data collected over four months from October 2019 to January 2020.

For the abovementioned period, we obtained a total of 433 posts in the 109 days analysed. From this total, the posts were categorised as follows:

Figure 1:

Posts distribution per category- November 2019 elections



In these elections, the largest number of posts include topics related to the opposition, 27% respectively, closely followed by the posts announcing the party's proposals, totalling 26%.

In November 2019, the SRU party was outside the governing coalition, composed of National Liberal Party ministers (plus two independent ministers). The parties outside the governing coalition aim to influence the voters to direct their interest and political attention to them; thus, there is the assumption that political parties always have an eye on the next elections (Tuttnauer & Wegmann, 2022). We can thus assume that the campaign carried out on social media by the SRU group had the same goal: presenting the opposition in an unfavourable light so that the voters notice the irregularities in the current governing coalition and not only.

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The party’s political agenda was also a central tool in the campaign launched on Facebook, so 26% of the analysed posts contain information about the proposals the party would reject if it emerged victorious after the elections.

Also, another important aspect is worth mentioning in the present case. Of the 433 analysed posts, only 44 contain a dialogue between the party and the voters. Thus, only 19% of the posts refer to situations in which the political party offered one or more answers to voters’ comments. There would have been expected to be a much more present dialogue in the current campaign, especially in light of the fact that the SRU party was a relatively new one established in the Romanian political landscape.

I also gave importance to those posts containing information or showing the party leader at that time, Dan Barna. Thus, out of the total of 433 analysed posts, in 84 of them, the political leader is surprised.

It is interesting for the current research to observe how the posts in which the party leader is mentioned are related to those in which he does not appear.

Table 1

Reactions distribution according to the leader and non-leader posts- November 2019 elections

<i>Post Type</i>	<i>Number of Posts</i>	<i>Likes</i>	<i>Comms</i>	<i>Shares</i>
Non-Leader-Post	349	255901	33486	49991
		733.24	95.95	143.24
Leader post	84	70379	10009	12840
		837.85	119.15	152.86

In Table 1, I captured how the leader/non-leader posts are presented due to the number of likes, comments and shares. Thus, I divided the number of reactions by the number of posts and obtained, as you can see:

- Regarding the number of likes, the posts featuring the political leader have a higher number of likes/posts, a difference of over 100 likes.
- Regarding the number of comments: also, in this case, the posts that contain the leader of the political group got more comments than the posts in which he is not present
- Regarding the number of shares, the number of shares is higher in the case of posts that depict the political leader.

The method used in the table above shows a trend but to the detriment of the nuances. I wanted to observe a global average per post regarding the posts that include the political leader and those that do not refer to him. It should be mentioned, however, that the difference between the number of likes, comments,

and shares between the two types of posts is not extremely large. Therefore, we can conclude that the leader remains an image vector of the party, there are slight differences between the two types of posts, and the non-leader messages are just as relevant to the electorate.

Moreover, the data presented above show that this party is not dependent on the leader but a party that asserts itself through its electoral program; this means that the electorate tends to remain loyal to the party regardless of the party's leadership changes.

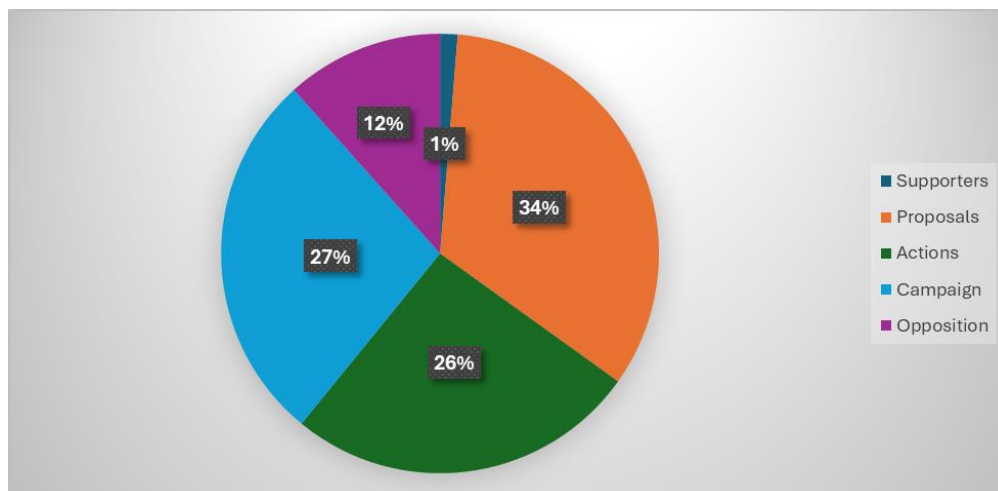
PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS: DECEMBER 2020

Regarding the Parliamentary elections in December 2020, I used a series of data collected over three months, November 2020-February 2021.

For the period mentioned above, we analysed a total of 619 posts; they are divided as follows:

Figure 2

Posts distribution per category- December 2020 elections



We can observe the following in the case of the figure above: the campaign from December 2020 focused on the transmission to the electorate, through the SRU Facebook page, of legislative proposals, projects, etc., which the party and the party leader thought, totalling 34% of the total posts for the studied period. In the same electoral logic, 27% of the posts are focused on the electoral campaign, urging voters to express their choice and to support the party in question, and 26% of the posts sum up those posts through which the party “brags” about its successes in governing.

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The presence of the leader in the posts on the SRU Facebook page was not very considerable but somewhat meaningful, considering that they obtained a vast number of likes, comments and shares, according to the table below

Table 2

Reactions distribution according to the leader and non-leader posts- December 2020 elections

<i>Post Type</i>	<i>Number of Posts</i>	<i>Likes</i>	<i>Comms</i>	<i>Shares</i>
Non-Leader-Post	587	325918	47903	51018
Leader Post	32	555.23 20010 625.31	81.61 7524 235.13	86.91 4274 133.56

I used the same logic in the current calculations, thus dividing the number of likes, comments and shares by the number of posts, thus obtaining a global average of each element per post. Just as in the case of the 2019 elections, one can easily observe a much higher number of reactions, comments and shares regarding the posts containing the image of the party leader.

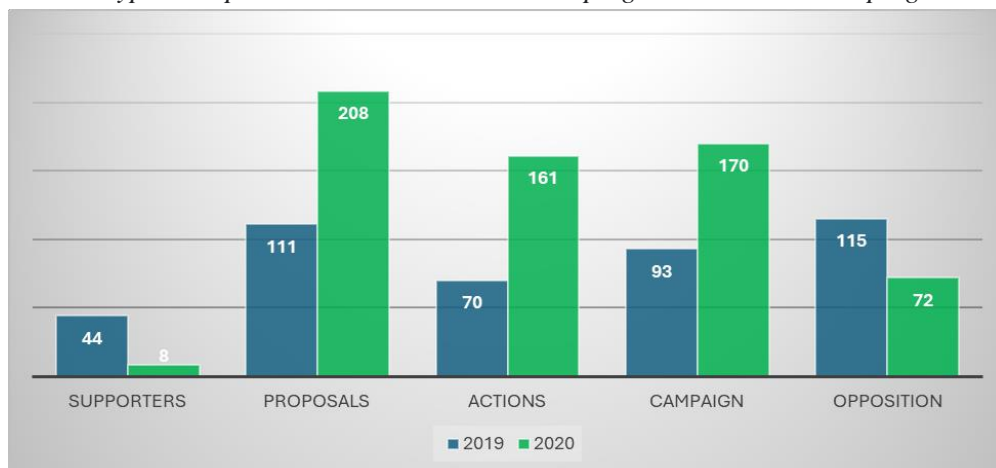
A considerable difference can be observed in the comments part; thus, posts containing information about the leader contain more than three times more comments than the other types of posts. In the present case, from my point of view, one of the limitations of the research is fixed on this element, namely the comments on the post. Indeed, an analysis of each comment text would be desirable in order to be able to determine in which category the people who comment on the posts of this Facebook page belong: either we are talking about supporters of the party – who publish positive comments, exhortations, cheers to the party; or we can have haters among those comments – those who publish negative comments about the party and, why not, make propaganda for other political formations.

Next, it can be easily observed what I mentioned in the case of Table 1, namely: the party’s supporters are generally attracted by the party’s ideology and political agenda, not necessarily by the party’s leader; it is not a party that the leader dominates and, therefore, of supporters who will support the party because of this leader.

To more easily visualise a comparative analysis between the two electoral periods, we can see the following graph:

Figure 3

Post types comparison between the 2019 campaign and the 2020 campaign

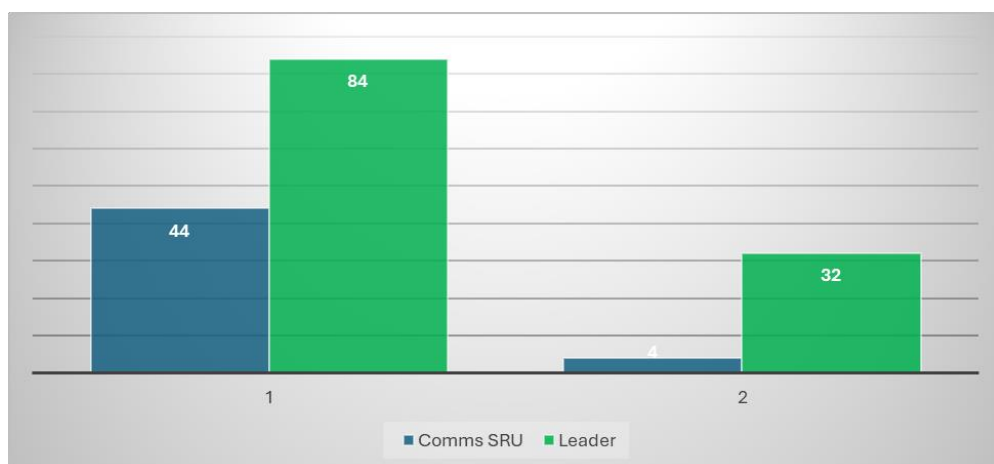


According to the figure above, we can observe two different political communication strategies within a distance of one year. If in 2019, SRU bet on posts that referred to the opposition and a series of posts regarding their political proposals and political agenda, in 2020, a considerable focus will be placed on the Facebook campaign and also the presentation of the political agenda, a critical element for any type of election.

We can also observe a significant difference due to the number of answers given to voters to the comments in the posts and the number of posts in which the political leader is present.

Figure 4

Campaign posts comparison, which includes comments/leader



As mentioned above, according to Kalsnes (2016), the dialogue between the voters and the party, be it indirectly by providing answers to the voters' comments,

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is an essential point to keep in mind for any campaign. In the absence of effective communication between the party and the electorate, the results may be undesirable. Also, the leader's non-involvement in the posts on the Facebook page is seen in Figure 4, although, according to Table 2, the posts that depict the leader get more likes, comments and shares than those posts in which the party leader is not present.

Conclusions

Social media represents an extreme communication tool to be used for various purposes, among which, in recent years, politicians have also decided to move part of their communication with the electorate to the online environment.

In conclusion, the purpose of this research was to carry out an analysis of the posts on the SRU Facebook page in two electoral campaign periods: the elections for the President of Romania (December 2019) and the elections for the Parliament of Romania (November 2020); to observe which are the main themes addressed in the two campaigns, which are the posts that attract the most voters' attention, and last but not least, how the communication/dialogue between the party and the electorate manifests itself.

In the case of the 2019 presidential elections, the posts on the SRU Facebook page were aimed at the opposition regarding the illegalities they committed and, secondly, at the proposals that the party would fulfil if the election result were in favour of the party.

The 2020 Parliamentary elections marked a change in strategy on the part of the party from the perspective of communication with the electorate. Thus, the online campaign carried out by the party was focused on the presentation of the proposals, followed by posts that refer to the electoral campaign and not, finally, a significant number of posts that refer to the party's actions. In the case of these elections, the posts referring to the opposition were a tiny number, totalling only 12% of the total posts.

Voters tend to be interested in the hot topics at the time; thus, for the 2019 elections, the posts related to the party's campaign had the most significant interest, followed by the posts related to the opposition. Regarding the 2020 elections, the proposals represented the point of interest for visitors to the SRU Facebook page, followed by the party's actions.

Regarding political communication, in the present case, one-way communication persists; therefore, the political party is the one that transmits its information to the voters and makes its presence felt online, but the answer to the

voters is delayed. As can be seen in Figure 4, the number of comments and replies to their own posts, respectively, to Internet users' comments is much too small to conclude that, in this case, the communication between the party and the voters is active and, therefore, successful.

Therefore, political communication plays a significant role in the current global context in which, with the help of social media, politicians can transmit their messages, agendas, and thoughts straightforwardly to voters. There needs to be more than a constant online presence to make an electoral campaign successful. However, the interaction between the party and the electorate also plays a primary role in the success of any election.

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