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## Targets and Resources

### *Determinants of Party-Based Online Campaign Strategies in the Case of the 2021 Parliamentary Elections in Bulgaria*

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**ABSTRACT** Political parties in Central and Eastern Europe have become increasingly reliant on online tools to mobilize electoral support, a trend that seemed to have been further catalyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This article seeks to understand what factors determine the approaches parties took toward their online campaign. By looking into the online approaches of eight parliamentary-represented political parties in Bulgaria from the three parliamentary elections in 2021, the analysis shows that the type of online campaigns of parties depends, to a large extent, on the way parties use their resources, as well as their target audience. The basis for this conclusion is a qualitative analysis of media reports from the campaigns of the three elections. This finding suggests the need for a closer investigation on the interplay between party organization, use of online tools, and campaign appeals.

**KEYWORDS** online campaigns, elections, parties, drivers, Bulgaria

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## INTRODUCTION

Online electoral campaigns have become business-as-usual for political parties in Central and Eastern Europe in the last decade. While internet penetration in countries in the region continues to lag behind that in their Western counterparts (van Kessel et al. 2022), parties are increasingly using online tools to communicate with their members and supporters (Cutts and Haughton 2021) in order to keep them active and potentially bring them to the ballot box. The COVID-19 pandemic further catalyzed the use of such tools in response to social distancing rules, which restricted conventional face-to-face campaigns. The existing literature on online campaigns reveals what platforms parties and candidates use (Quinlan et al. 2018), the reasons for adopting certain platforms (Peterson 2012), the effects of this use (Galais and Cardenal 2017), and the overall dynamics of communicating online (Vergeer 2019). Nevertheless, there are a couple of research gaps.

First, existing works focus predominantly on individual candidates' online campaigns, while paying less attention to how and why political parties use platforms in a certain way during electoral campaigns. This is relevant because existing works highlight the mediating role of political parties regarding the nature of their candidates' electoral campaigns (Bøggild and Pedersen 2018). Additionally, given the important role party affiliation, rather than candidate profile, has for voter choice (Bonneau and Cann 2015), it is

important to better understand party-centered online electoral campaigns. Second, we know very little about the determinants of party-centered online electoral campaigns. So far, the literature has looked into the various factors determining individual campaigns (Cogels and Baudewyns 2019), as well as the overall effects of online campaigns (Warrnick et al. 2006). While online campaigns became an integral part of any electoral campaign, we have limited understanding of what factors influence the choice for a particular online approach to communicate with supporters and potential voters during elections. As existing works reveal, online campaigns may either overcome existing resource inequalities between parties, or could amplify them (Gibson and McAllister 2015). Therefore, knowing what drives parties to choose a particular online approach may help us better understand the role of online campaigns for political and party activism. Campaigns are important for Bulgarian politics, as voters closely follow political campaigns, even those on referendums (Gherghina and Bankov 2020), while parties tend to campaign even outside electoral periods (Stoychev and Tomova 2019). The importance of campaigns grew significantly in the last few years, as Bulgaria held three parliamentary and one presidential election in 2021 alone—something that has not happened in the postwar history of any established democracy.

This article addresses these gaps by seeking to identify what factors drive political parties to use a particular online campaign approach. It focuses on the three parliamentary elections held in Bulgaria in 2021 because the internet, particularly Facebook, is a central source for news for Bulgarians (Newman et al. 2022). More importantly, these elections were held at a pertinent time, between April and November 2021, which forced parties to be innovative in using online tools given the social distancing restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis relies on a typology of online campaigns based on their significance within the broad electoral campaign that combines offline and online activities and communication to mobilize voters. This allows the contextualization of the use of online tools by different parties. The main result is that party use of online campaigns depends mainly on the way they use their campaign resources as well as their target audiences. This suggests that the amount of campaign resources is less relevant than it has been implied previously in the literature. The basis for this conclusion is a content analysis of media reports on the online campaigns of the eight parliamentary-represented parties during the official campaign periods of the three 2021 Bulgarian parliamentary elections (March 5 to April 4, June 12 to July 11, October 15 to November 14). The parties' Facebook campaigns received particular focus given the platform's significance in terms of media consumption in Bulgarian society.

The second section explores the literature to provide a definition of party-centered online campaigns, as well as highlight potential factors that may shape the decision to run an online campaign. The third section introduces the case, as well as the data and methods of analysis. The fourth section presents the main findings of the analysis, and the final fifth section ends with a summary and discussion of the main insights concluding with an overview of the potential paths for future research.

## PARTY-CENTERED ONLINE CAMPAIGNS AND THEIR DETERMINANTS

Online electoral campaigns concern campaign activities that occur on the internet, where parties use social media or other platforms to communicate their message and engage with current or prospective voters. Such campaigns are part of a wider communication strategy that may involve the use of other forms of media, such as television and radio in support of direct, face-to-face campaign activities, such as events, posters, leafleting, canvassing, and so on. We know that online engagement motivates people to act politically offline (Angyal and Fellner 2020), so online campaigns play an important role in mobilization, although these effects should not be exaggerated (Bright et al. 2020). Nevertheless, politicians increasingly adopt online tools for their campaign and other political activities (Peterson 2012), usually dependent on a variety of individual reasons and factors (Metag and Marcinkowski 2012). This adaptation by individual politicians made existing research on online campaigns focus predominantly on individual campaigns, emphasizing a growing trend of personalization (Blach-Ørsten, Eberholst, and Burkal 2017). Yet, the political parties, represented by these candidates, play an important mediating role regarding the nature of these campaigns, as well as their effects (Bøggild and Pedersen 2018). This is important to recognize, as in particular circumstances—for example, under proportional representation or mixed-member electoral rules (Fox 2018; Zittel 2009)—individual campaigns may be secondary to broader party-centered campaigns, which promote the general party message rather than that of the individual candidate. In this context it is important to recognize that online campaigns are part of a wider campaign that also involves the use of conventional (Krueger 2006) or, as this article would refer to them, face-to-face or offline methods of campaigning. Therefore, online campaign approaches may have different significance for political parties, as revealed from the use of participatory practices among parties in Central and Eastern Europe (Gherghina and Oross 2023).

The existing literature on party-centered online campaigns pays significant attention to their effects, particularly when it comes to campaign competition. In this respect, as previous studies revealed (Gibson and McAllister 2015), online campaigns may be narrowing down any competitive differences between parties that exist offline (“equalization”), or they may actually amplify campaigning inequalities from real life (“normalization”). Less work has been done on its drivers, usually focused on whether parties would adopt a certain tool (Quinlan et al. 2018). The few works on the drivers of party-centered campaigns (Datts 2020; Whitesell, Reuning, and Hannah 2022) do not offer an overarching framework on explaining the choice for a particular online approach.

We know that the role of online approaches varies depending on the chosen communication strategy (Klinger and Russmann 2017), which leads the identification of four ideal types of party-centered electoral campaigns depending on the balance between online and offline party activities. We would expect that parties would have a different level of emphasis on online tools and thus take an online campaign approach, in order to reach out to potential voters in such a way that would provide them a competitive advantage against their political opponents. This competitive advantage should be

TABLE 1. Four Types of Online Campaigns

	High Level of Online Activities	Low Level of Online Activities
High Level of Offline Activities	Standard	Limited
Low Level of Offline Activities	Predominant	Passive

understood as the improved ability of a political party to mobilize an electoral constituency compared to their competitors. In relation to the topic of this article, this means that online campaign approaches would enable political parties to mobilize support where other parties could not or can do it less efficiently. Table 1 summarizes the different ideal campaign types.

Starting with the first type, a standard online campaign would entail high levels of online activities coupled with high levels of offline activities. Such a campaign should be the most commonly used by political parties that try to amplify existing competitive inequalities and thus favors parties that have an abundance of organizational resources at their disposal. Such parties tend to be major and/or mainstream ones, and for that reason their practices may be seen as the norm, hence the “standard” categorization. Nevertheless, such an approach may be counteracted by a predominant online approach, which places the online campaign at the very center of the overall campaign approach. This category is a combination of a strong online presence that compensates for a lesser offline engagement. A limited online approach may be preferred in combination with a strong offline engagement. The final category, a passive online approach, should be the rarest type, as it is generally expected that parties would try to engage with supporters and potential voters in some way. Nevertheless, in theory this category is possible but should be treated as an extreme case.

In order to understand which factors drive the choice for a particular campaign approach, the following paragraphs summarize the literature on individual-based campaigns and adapt it for the study of party-based campaigns. The main goal in this exercise is to test the extent to which factors listed below influenced the decision by political parties to use a particular online approach. The comprehensive framework from Metag and Marcinkowski (2012), who distinguish between structural, strategic, and individual factors, has considerable efficacy. According to them, structural factors are concerned with the environment within which the campaign takes place and it involves factors such as the technological development of the place (country) or the demographic profile of the electoral constituency. Strategic factors are concerned with the particularities of the competition, such as incumbency, the competitiveness of the race or the ideology of the party the candidate represents. Finally, individual factors emphasize the specific background of the candidate, such as their age or gender.

#### Party Age and Party Organization

Starting from the last set of factors—individual determinants—it makes sense to transform it into an institutional factor that considers the particularities of the political

parties. In this respect, we test the relevance of two important factors that may determine the choice: party age and party organization.

Party age refers to the length of campaign experience a party has accumulated prior to choosing to use online campaigns. We know from the existing literature that parties tend to embrace the campaign methods that are relevant at the time of their inception, while remaining rather reluctant to adopt new campaign methods if it does not improve their mobilization abilities (Farrell 2002). In other words, the inertia of experience motivates party resistance toward online campaigning. Ward and Gibson (2009) reveal that new channels would be much more eagerly embraced by new political actors to overcome any deficiencies in terms of resources or organization. In contrast, Lobera and Portos (2021) point out that age may not matter per se, but the embrace of offline extra-institutional political activities would drive parties to be active online as well. Nevertheless, this finding seems to be related to factors besides party age; hence, we still may test whether the general rule holds: new parties tend to be more open toward using online campaigns more heavily than older ones.

Party organization is another important factor in the approach to online campaigning. Previous works rely on the distinction between hierarchical, stratarchical, and connective parties to explore their relationship to technology (Oross and Tap 2023), but this framework focuses on who has the power to make decisions on adopting and using technology rather than what influences these decisions. That is why this article returns to the classical categorization between cadre, mass, catch-all, and cartel parties (Katz and Mair 1995), which focus rather on the extent to which these parties rely on their members for their activities. The reason for this choice is that members are an important resource for political parties that allow them to engage with potential voters during the campaign (Gherghina, Iancu, and Soare 2018; van Haute and Gauja 2015; Scarrow 2014). Existing research reveals that a dense network of local party organizations with active members across a country allow a party to maintain strong links with society and thus persist electorally (Gherghina and Soare 2019). In campaign terms this density of network and activeness of members translates into the ability to be active both online and offline (Scarrow, Webb, and Poguntke 2017), as evidenced also from cases in Central and Eastern Europe (Marian 2018). Hence, we expect that parties with dense networks and/or active members will be more active online.

### Campaign Resources

Moving on to strategic factors, Metag and Marcinkowski (2012) seem to emphasize the importance of the political context of electoral competition. This factor may have a more institutional nature when it comes to individual-based campaigns, which we have addressed in the previous paragraphs. Nevertheless, these contextual factors are relevant for party-based campaigns as well. Most of them can be considered equal, particularly if we speak about competition under proportional representation rules, where the level of competitiveness or incumbency remains constant across electoral constituencies given that the electoral competition is done in the territory at large rather than in individual constituencies.

Nevertheless, there are factors from the political context of the electoral competition that are relevant to parties too, namely the available resources at party disposal. There are two ways of looking at its potential impact: quantitative and qualitative. The former means that the abundance of campaign resources, particularly campaign finances, allows parties to be active online as they have the means to produce a variety of material that could be promoted frequently by the platform (Dommett and Power 2019). In other words, the more finances a party has at its disposal, the more likely it is to augment its offline activities with online engagement too. The latter requires a look at the overall approach parties take to use their resources for electoral mobilization. Peña (2021), for example, reveals that parties may use their resources differently, dependent on whether they rely on professional services or on the multitude of their members, as well as on the forms of their activities (conventional versus unconventional). Building upon this, we expect that parties that rely on professional services and use conventional methods of campaigning will be inclined to use online campaigns in a more pronounced way, given the recognition of online campaigns as an important element of a contemporary electoral mobilization strategy.

### Target Audience

Finally, structural factors are relevant when it comes to individual constituency campaigns, usually done under majoritarian rules. They are less relevant when it comes to proportional representation elections, which are the norm for Central and Eastern Europe and where the goal is to maximize mobilization across the country. In such circumstances, parties rely on one common strategy that would seek such a maximization across constituencies (Roper, Holtz-Bacha, and Mazzoleni 2004). In this respect, rather than recognizing the specificity of the constituency, parties think about the electorate at large when it comes to approaching potential voters online. In such circumstances, the most common denominator between individual-based campaigns and party-based ones seems to be the demographic that parties seek to mobilize, that is, their target audience (Magin et al. 2017).

The target audience is an important structural factor that may determine whether or not parties use online campaigns. During campaigns parties seek not only to mobilize their core supporters, but also to potentially reach out to peripheral supporters to gain a competitive advantage. How to reach these voter groups depends on their demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, ethnicity, place of living, and so on and their personal preferences (political, social, consumer, etc.). The literature on microtargeting in particular recognizes such an approach as an important way of mobilizing voters online (Dommett 2019), given that a specific message to a particular type of voter, based on their demographic or preferential background, may convince them to support the messaging party (Lavigne 2021). The important part in this respect is to make sure that the potential voter actually sees the posted message. Hence, we expect parties that target groups, which are noticeably active online, to opt for more pronounced use of online campaigns in their repertoire.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

This article focuses on the case of Bulgaria, as it held three parliamentary elections in 2021 (regular elections in April and an early vote in both July and November). In those, eight different parties and alliances entered parliament: in all three parliaments were the center-right Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), the center-left Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the liberal centrist and representing the large Turkish minority Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), the liberal right alliance Democratic Bulgaria (DB), and the populist There Is Such a People (ITN); on two occasions, in April and in July, the populist alliance Stand Up! Thugs Out! (ISMV); only in November the parliament entered the liberal centrist We Continue the Change (PP) and the populist radical right Revival (Vazrazhdane).

These eight parties and alliances were chosen for three key reasons. First, they represent the majority of party membership in Bulgaria (Krasteva, Klisurova, and Dimitrova 2018), which would help us reveal the relevance of organizational resources and experience in the country. Second, they were also at the forefront of using online campaign tools in the past decade. This was particularly noticeable in the 2021 elections, when more than half of their expenditure was on social media activities, particularly Facebook (Institute for Public Environment Development 2022), but even before this there were enough indications that Bulgarian parties embraced online methods of campaigning (Seizov 2017). The use of social media by Bulgarian parties became particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic. The virus hit Bulgarian society quite hard, as its unreformed, understaffed, and under-resourced health system could not cope with the mounting infection numbers (Euractiv.com 2020), and the government implemented only piecemeal measures to prevent the spread (Reuters 2021). As a result, the elections in 2021 occurred in rather unusual circumstances where officially there were significant social distancing measures, whereas in reality most parties, even those supporting a tough response to prevent further spread of the pandemic, have not noticeably upheld those measures because of limited sanctions. In such circumstances, all eight parties were well-prepared for the elections, choosing a campaign strategy that would best fit their goals. Third, as it would be seen below, the chosen parties present a significant variation in terms of the four chosen variables, including resources, ideology, and so on, which allows for a more clear-cut and comprehensive analysis.

This article relies on a qualitative content analysis of media reports of the online campaigns of the eight parties that entered the Bulgarian parliament in 2021, listed above. The choice of method had two main drivers—time and convenience. The qualitative analysis of articles allowed the researcher to gain an independent assessment on the potential impact of the identified factors in circumstances where data availability is a challenge (Bankov and Gherghina 2020). The downside of this approach is that it is based on external media narratives rather than internal insights from people directly involved in the campaign (Macnamara 2005). While such insights would have been welcomed, the dynamic political situation in Bulgaria, which at the time of writing led to the fall of the four-party coalition government just seven months after its formation in

December 2021 (Tsolova 2022), led to numerous unsuccessful attempts to schedule and conduct a series of interviews with such insiders. A quantitative statistical analysis (such as multivariate logistic analysis) on the potential correlation between the four factors and the online campaigns of the parties was not possible given the small-*N* character of this research.

The dependent variable of this research, the type of online campaign for each party or alliance, has been assessed based on their activities on their official pages on Facebook. High overall levels of regular posts indicate higher reliance on online campaign; high proportion of posts on party offline events during the campaign vis-à-vis posts promoting party policy, slogans, and so on indicates higher reliance on standard online campaign methods. The individual variables for the eight parties and alliances were identified as follows. *Party age* is determined based on whether the party (or the main organization of the alliance) has participated in a previous parliamentary election (Hug 2001). In this respect, only PP, ITN, and ISMV were considered as “new” parties, the rest being “old” ones. While ISMV includes parties with prior electoral experience, the main organization around which this alliance has been formed, was a new one. *Party organization* has been assessed based on the party organizational network at the time of the election with the help on the available information on local party branches on social media and on the parties’ official websites. An active party branch would be one that has posted at least once in 2021 on social media during the campaign. If a party has more than 50% of its branches considered as active, then overall its party organization is treated as an active party organization. A dense party network depends on the extent a party has local party organizations across all 265 municipalities in the country. If a party has more than 133 local party organizations (i.e., 50% of all municipalities), then its organizational network is considered as a dense one. Regarding the electoral alliances, this study worked on the assumption that the entities within the alliance would compensate each other for any organizational deficiencies. Hence, the assessment of organizational coverage and membership relies on an aggregated membership and party branch numbers to assess the density of the party network.<sup>1</sup>

The level of *campaign resources* was assessed based on the officially declared campaign expenses by the eight parties and alliances to the Court of Audit and summarized and analyzed by the Open Parliament platform of the Institute for Public Environment Development, an independent NGO promoting political education and civic participation. The data contain the amount of expenditure according to several categories, including online promotion, for each party, which allows assessment of the size of party resources invested in online campaigns for each case. In terms of use of party resources, the analysis focused on the extent parties invested their resources in paid ads on Facebook. Using data available on Ad Library, the official Facebook platform on advertisement transparency, it was possible to establish which party or alliance has focused

1. If two or more parties have a branch in the same place, it is counted as a single alliance branch. Unfortunately, the research for this article did not find reliable information on distinguishing which party of the electoral alliance had the most active role among their allies at a place.



predominantly on conventional online methods. If a party has not relied on such ads, the assumption is that it relied more on unconventional methods to distribute its messages. *Target audience* has been assessed by the commonalities of the electoral profile for each party or alliance between the 2021 elections and the 2017 ones, using the available exit poll data of Gallup International. Gallup provides rich comparable information on voters' demographic characteristics, including age, gender, place of living, social class, and ethnicity. This allows us to identify the common demographic features of the parties' voters between 2017 and 2021. It is safe to assume that these common features constitute the core voters of these parties, which are to be mobilized.

The assessment of the above-described variables looks at whether a particular type of online campaign can be associated with a particular variable. This is based on a between-case comparison at party level; that is, if two or more parties are part of a single type of online approach, the comparison between them may reveal a potential association. Following the assessment of the variables, the qualitative content analysis on the media reports helped identify the overall impact of each factor. This is an important step to verify the relevance of the patterns observed from the assessment above. This analysis proceeded as follows: it involved the search and analysis of articles from six media outlets (*Dnevnik, Kapital, Sega, Duma, 24 Chasa, Trud*), which represent a broad ideological variety, as well as a diversity of stances toward the competing parties. The time frame of analysis was the official campaign periods (March 5 to April 4, June 12 to July 11, October 15 to November 14) of the three parliamentary elections. Relevant articles were identified using the search function in the media website, which included the name or abbreviation of the respective party in combination with the words "online," "elections," "campaign," "activity," "event," "meeting," and "conversation." This way, it was possible to identify reports on electoral campaign events and/or the role of online tools for the electoral campaign of the eight parties and alliances. The identified articles were screened for false positives before being included in the final analysis. While the total number of relevant articles was relatively low ( $N = 64$ ), the majority of them included information on multiple parties, thus allowing at least 10 observations per party.

The data analysis involved the coding of each relevant article in relation to the party and factor, for which they include information, as well as an assessment of the relevance of the identified factor(s) for the particular online campaign. The assessment was "high relevance" if the article includes information that the respective factor has an impact on the chosen online campaign approach or "low relevance" if the information suggests a limited impact of a factor. A "medium relevance" assessment would entail that there is mixed information about the impact of the particular factor. Subsequently the overall relevance for each factor for each party has been calculated as the mean based on all coded articles, where "high" gets the weighting of 3, "medium" – 2, "low" – 1. A mean of means reveals the overall impact of each factor. For ease of understanding, the means were rounded up and translated back to the "low" to "high" categories. The coding has been done by the author and verified by two further coders, who were assigned random articles. Upon comparison of the codes, it can be confirmed that the coding was highly accurate. The following section summarizes the main findings of the analysis.

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The online campaigns of the eight Bulgarian parties took broadly three different approaches. Three parties (GERB, DB, PP) rely on well-known Facebook tools, such as posts spreading their programmatic messages to potential voters, comments and responses to current political developments, updates on campaign events, campaign videos, and advertisements, including paid publications. This presence is particularly visible for all three parties, as they managed to amplify the visibility of their campaign activities. Here, the online campaigns seem to support the ongoing face-to-face campaign, while also ensuring a strong online presence for the three parties. Key aspects for the three parties are the use of paid ads, regular live streams of campaign events (usually meetings with potential voters), as well as campaign videos (Kasabova 2021).

Two of the eight parties (ITN and Vazrazhdane) rely on a slightly different approach than the ones above. ITN conducted some face-to-face events during the three electoral campaigns, but its main campaign vehicle has been the 7/8 TV Channel (also available for online stream), which was set up and run by the party leadership and which communicated directly to the potential voters and supporters of the party. In such circumstances the online campaign of ITN seems to amplify the messages that were spread on TV, as its posts on social media (particularly on Facebook) contain mainly video snippets on the electoral campaign from the TV channel. The party relied to some extent on standard methods, as its posts were seen also as paid ads on Facebook, but it was its live streams of its TV channel that were noticeable on Facebook (Raycheva et al. 2022).

Vazrazhdane, in contrast, has a more pronounced online presence, whereas its offline campaign activities are less visible. The party had some of the most active and engaging Facebook profiles, particularly the page of its leader, Kostadin Kostadinov, as well as the official party Facebook page (Raycheva et al. 2022). Existing analysis of the online campaign of Vazrazhdane reveals a heavy use of unconventional approaches, including the spread of disinformation through its official channels and, more importantly, the reliance on Facebook groups to spread the seemingly nonpartisan content that is in line with the party message (Centre for the Study of Democracy 2021). This online approach seemed to have worked, as it created the impression that Vazrazhdane enjoys significant social support, as well as mobilizing its core supporters, as the Facebook groups, where these messages are posted, are predominantly either party-internal groups or such groups that relate to topics that may be of interest for its supporters (Fileva 2021).

The remaining three parties included in the analysis (DPS, BSP, ISMV) generally had a limited online campaign. The three parties had some social media presence, particularly on Facebook, but their online engagement has been overshadowed by both their competitors online, as well as by their own offline campaign efforts (Kasabova 2021; Raycheva et al. 2022). They mainly relied on posts on their official pages and those of their candidates and leaders without much use of paid ads or updates from the campaign trail, and their message was not noticeably present across Facebook groups. In short, whereas the three parties waged a face-to-face campaign across the country, particularly in their strongholds, their social media campaign seemed rather detached from the face-to-face campaign.

TABLE 2. Summary of Chosen Campaign Approaches by Bulgarian Political Parties and Associated Factors

Online Campaign Type	Party	Party Age	Party Organization	Party Resources	Target Audience
Standard	GERB	Old	Dense and active	Resourceful and conventional use	Middle class, active online
	DB	Old	Active	Resourceful and conventional use	Urban voters, active online
	PP	New	Active	Resourceful and conventional use	Urban voters, active online
Predominant	Vazrazhdane	Old	Active	Limited resources and unconventional use	Active online, low levels of political trust
	ITN	New	Active	Limited resources and unconventional use	Active online, low levels of political trust
Limited	DPS	Old	Dense	Resourceful and conventional use	Minority voters
	BSP	Old	Dense	Resourceful and conventional use	Elderly voters
	ISMV	New	Active	Limited resources and conventional use	Elderly voters, middle class

As can be seen in Table 2, an initial overview of the factors suggests a few interesting patterns. First and foremost, limited online campaigns could not be captured by any of the four factors, as the three parties in that category differ noticeably in terms of their age, organizational density, and resources. Where they converge is in their target audience, as will be discussed further below. Hence, it seems that limited online campaigns depend largely on the target audience if anything else. Second, the paramount online campaigns of ITN and Vazrazhdane seemed to be a product of their active party organizations and use of party resources, while they share relatively similar profile of target audience with the three parties that undertook standard campaign approaches. Third, those three parties varied noticeably in terms of party age, but nevertheless they enjoyed active party organizations and relied on comprehensive organizational resources and conventional methods of mobilization. Overall, the initial assessment of the variables in relation to the particular online campaign approach suggests that apart from party age, all other factors seem to matter for the different campaign approaches.

Moving on to the general impact of these factors, the evidence regarding the role of *party age* for the chosen online strategies remains rather mixed. On one hand, there is the evidence of ITN and PP, which were founded in, respectively, 2018 and 2021, and their noticeable online presence, which seems to confirm the general expectation that newer

parties would be more inclined to use online campaigns than older ones. This is further confirmed by the cases of BSP and DPS, which had a rather limited online presence, particularly DPS, whereas in the case of BSP it was mainly the Facebook page of its president, Korneliya Ninova, that was spreading the party message (Raycheva et al. 2022). On the other hand, there are parties with significant or at least some campaign experience, such as GERB (founded in 2007), DB (founded in 2018, but the parties in this liberal right alliance exist since 2004), and Vazrazhdane (founded in 2014 and participated in the 2017 elections) that had relied strongly on their Facebook presence, thus challenging the original hypothesis. Moreover, the ISMV case seems to be counter-intuitive to the original hypothesis. The alliance had some online presence and although it entered new territories, such as having an active TikTok account of its leader, Maya Manolova (Kasabova 2021), its use of Facebook has been rather limited. This is rather unexpected, as the alliance was formed in 2021 and its main organization, the civic network called Stand Up.BG, was founded only two years earlier in 2019. Overall, it seems that the length of party existence and/or campaign experience has a mixed impact on the choice of online campaign approach.

Similarly, *party organizations* also seem to have a mixed impact on the chosen online strategy. Standard campaigns with noticeable online presence were conducted by parties with dense organizational networks and/or active members: GERB has one of the most comprehensive organizational networks, whereas DB enjoys a significant organizational coverage in combination with very active membership, particularly in its urban strongholds (Krasteva, Klisurova, and Dimitrova 2018). PP seems to be the exception to the rule here, as the party had no organizational structures during the November 2021 elections, having to rely on the registration of three minor parties (Duma.bg 2021).

The significance of organizational network density seems to be challenged by the fact that two parties with comprehensive organizational networks (Krasteva, Klisurova, and Dimitrova 2018), BSP and DPS, opted for a rather limited online presence. In the case of BSP this could be explained with the fact that despite its density, its party cells lack vibrancy, which has been a long-term problem for the party (BSP 2015). DPS, in contrast, has a relatively dense and vibrant network, especially in its strongholds, being involved with the local community in a variety of ways (Dimitrova 2022). A potential reason for this deviation relates to the target audience of these two parties, focused mainly on mobilizing their core supporters, rather than broadening their support. ISMV aimed to develop a network of local organizations in the past years (Dimitrova 2020), but it is by far less comprehensive than those of DPS and BSP, thus corroborating the expectation that parties with limited manpower would opt for more limited online activities.

Furthermore, we have two parties with rather limited organizational capabilities that nevertheless were noticeably active online. Both ITN and Vazrazhdane are parties that pay significant attention to growing their own networks, but given their rather recent emergence, they still lack the organizational density of the more established parties. For example, a quick glance on their websites suggests that both parties barely manage to have party cells across all municipalities in the country. This is overcome, however, by vibrant party organizations that use their membership to engage with potential voters across

Facebook groups and spread the party message. Both parties also have a strong online network of organizations, as they have, for example, a Facebook group for each electoral constituency (whether open in the case of ITN or closed for Vazrazhdane), which serves a similar function to the local party cells of those actors relying on standard online campaigns. In short, the online campaigns of the two parties seem to compensate for limited organizational capabilities, but more importantly, it is also related to the following factor: the resources that parties have at their disposal during the campaign.

A much clearer picture can be developed from the analysis of the impact of the amount and use of *campaign resources*. Starting with the quantitative assessment, we notice another mixed picture. According to media reports on campaign spending, it seems that the three main parties topping the media expenditure rankings of the November 2021 elections are also the most active online (Institute for Public Environment Development 2022), thus confirming the original expectations that the more financial resources a party has, the more active it will be online. This, however, seems to be challenged by data on the other parties that had slightly different approaches to online campaigns. Two further parties that were quite active online but relied on rather unconventional approaches—ITN and Vazrazhdane—spent much less on media campaigns, as they were never in the top five (Institute for Public Environment Development 2022). This challenges the idea that parties would necessarily try to overcome resource inequalities. As the parties that relied on limited online campaigns had significant campaign resources, especially the established BSP and DPS, it suggests that rather than having resources per se, it is actually how these resources are used by the parties that has greater impact.

Examining how the resources are used by the parties, we can see that resources can be directed toward different strategies because of different approaches. All three parties (GERB, DB, PP) that were most active online through conventional channels relied upon a professional rather than a participatory approach to mobilize resources (Kasabova 2021). These parties had a very professional presentation of their media content, further supported by well-organized face-to-face activities and media coverage, involving mainly meet-and-greet events, local meetings with supporters and potential voters, and so on. The cases of the parties that had rather limited online presence seem to challenge this. All three parties that were not noticeable online (BSP, DPS, ISMV) relied on professional presentation of their online and offline materials rather than involving participatory methods of campaigning, while also relying on rather conventional methods of mobilizing support (Kasabova 2021). This suggests that the particular use of resources works in combination with other factors, particularly the target audience as will be seen below.

What seems to provide support for the relevance of how resources are used for the choice of online strategy comes from the parties that were active online but used rather unconventional channels for their campaigns. Both parties (ITN and Vazrazhdane) involved much more pronounced participatory methods of campaigning, as their posts were spread and amplified by a number of their online supporters (Centre for the Study of Democracy 2021). We do not have data regarding whether there has been a purposeful effort by these parties to pursue such an approach, but nevertheless the noticeable

engagement by rank-and-file members and supporters in spreading the word clearly reveals that online campaigns may be pursued by other methods if parties use their resources differently in order to gain a competitive advantage. While the original expectation had been that online campaigns would be the realm of professional approaches and conventional methods, the evidence requires us to revise this hypothesis and to emphasize that using online campaigns can be very much part of the mobilization efforts of parties that rely on grassroots approaches as well.

Finally, the *target audience* seems to be detrimental to the chosen online approach by the Bulgarian parties. This concerns two key aspects: the individual profile of the targeted voter and the party aim of mobilization. In the case of those parties that were quite active online using well-known, conventional channels (GERB, DB, PP), we see that they tended to mobilize their core supporters, the bulk of which are working full-time, in their 30s to 50s, living in urban or suburban areas (Gallup International 2021a). This profile coincides to a large extent with the profile of the typical Bulgarian internet user (Kemp 2021), thus making the online campaign an important vehicle to reach out to people. Relying on conventional methods allows the parties to not only reach out to their core supporters but also to potentially broaden their appeal among supporters of the other parties, as all three of them were in significant competition for similar voter segments.

A similar profile of target audience can be pointed out for the parties that were quite active online but used rather unconventional approaches. In fact, both parties (ITN and Vazrazhdane) enjoyed significant support among younger voters, as well as among the Bulgarian diaspora (Gallup International 2021a; Konstantinov 2021), two groups that relied heavily on the internet to inform themselves about the political events in Bulgaria (Darik Radio 2017). Both parties also aimed at mobilizing nonvoters and vote-switchers in their campaigns. In this respect, it seems that the two parties' choice of unconventional methods of campaigning—whether direct messaging from their party-owned TV channel in the case of ITN or campaigning through Facebook groups in the case of Vazrazhdane—seems to enhance the anti-establishment profile of both parties by challenging the practices of the mainstream parties and thus aims to appeal to the rather disillusioned voters who have lost trust in mainstream politics.

Finally, for BSP and DPS the limited online presence reflected the limited internet use of their core electorates. BSP voters tend to be more senior and less tech-savvy (Gallup International 2021a), whereas DPS support is particularly strong in rural areas (Gallup International 2021a), particularly those populated by ethnic Turks. As these two audiences are hard to reach online, it seems logical for the two parties to limit their presence online, as this would not necessarily be effective for their campaigns. More importantly, both parties rely strongly on patronage networks for mobilizing support; hence online activities would be more in order to coordinate face-to-face campaign work rather than reach out to potential voters online. In the case of ISMV, their target audience has been a combination of liberal urban voters with traditional BSP voters (Gallup International 2021b) who can be reached mainly through face-to-face activities.

TABLE 3. Summary of Relevance of Factors from Analysis

Party Name	Party Age	Party Organization	Size of Party Resources	Use of Party Resources	Target Audience
GERB	Medium	High	High	High	High
BSP	Medium	Low	Low	Medium	High
DPS	Medium	Low	Low	Medium	High
PP	High	Low	Medium	High	High
DB	Medium	Medium	High	High	High
ITN	High	Medium	Low	Low	Medium
ISMV	Low	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium
Vazrazhdane	High	Medium	Low	High	High
Overall significance	Medium	Medium	Low	High	High

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Table 3 summarizes the main findings from the four factors that were explored here based on the qualitative content analysis. As can be seen, there are clear patterns across all eight parties related to each factor, which allows us to make an informed assessment of their relevance. From the table it can be highlighted that active online campaigns are a product of the way parties use their resources (both conventionally and unconventionally), as well as on their target audiences, where that audience generally uses the internet or a specific platform in order to be reached by the party. This finding seems to support the insights from works, such as those by Haughton and Deegan-Krause (2022), Hloušek and Kopeček (2010), Engler (2016), and Hanley and Sikk (2016), who emphasize the interplay between party organization, use of online tools, and target audiences—something that could be looked at in more detail in future works.

Another major finding is the rather limited relevance of the size of party resources and the mixed signals given by party age and party organization on the choice of online campaign approach. The former (limited relevance of the size of party resources) seems rather counterintuitive, as having resources should be detrimental of the amount of online presence, as suggested in previous works. Nevertheless, it seems that this finding reinforces the finding above that what is more important is how these resources are used in order to understand whether and how much parties would use online tools for electoral mobilization, as they may channel their resources toward rather concentrated effort away from online campaigns (or they may focus their potentially limited resources on online campaigns only).

In terms of the latter finding, it seems that the party profile in terms of age and organizational network may have an impact on the decision of how involved parties would be online, but it is hard to decipher what this impact would be. We saw in the case

of Bulgaria that parties new and old may be quite active online and may have limited engagement, thus corroborating Lobera and Portos's finding (2021) that there are no significant differences in the applied online strategy between new and old parties. Regarding the limited importance of party organization and given the relevance of how parties use their resources, it seems that the focus on organizational density does not necessarily reveal whether parties would use online tools for their campaign, but potentially the internal division of power and responsibilities may be more relevant in the decision to have an online campaign (Kefford 2018).

Overall, these findings make three important contributions to the literature. From a theoretical perspective, they suggest the significant role of target audience and the ways parties use their resources, which, coupled with the indecisive impact of party age and organization, seems to suggest that online campaign approaches are very much dependent on rather more short- to medium-term developments within parties instead of their organizational origins. Interestingly, as well, the amount of resources at parties' disposal does not seem to be significant for most cases, which challenges the view of the importance of financing for choosing an online campaign strategy. Empirically, this article provides an understanding of the drivers for the online electoral campaigns of the Bulgarian political parties during the eventful 2021, thus building upon the emerging literature on this case that looked mainly into the discourse practices (Kasabova 2021) or the used social media channels (Balova 2021). Methodologically, this article demonstrates the usefulness of qualitative content analysis of media reports for conducting a study on the influences on online campaigns, which overcomes the methodological difficulties related with data availability.

Building upon these insights, future works may take several paths. First, the topic can be approached with different methods, for example, through the help of interviews with insiders in party campaigns in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of the considerations and internal dynamics that shape this choice. This would allow, second, to test the influence of a different set of factors, as well as a different conceptualization of factors than were explored in this article. For example, interviews could very much help understand whether and how the way power is distributed within parties (as reflected in Oross and Tap's categorization, discussed above) influences the choice of online strategy. Third, a more comparative approach, which involves the experiences of electoral campaigning in different countries, may further reveal the impact of different factors on this choice.

Beyond these rather methodological modifications, future works need to expand on the dynamics that lead to a particular campaign approach. Given that this article established the importance of resources and target audience, a noticeable limitation here is the rather simplified operationalization of these two key factors. Therefore, a natural next step would be to focus on the interplay between use of parties' resources, target audience, and party organization to better understand how parties choose their campaign approach. Future works may investigate also the dynamics between ideology, party messaging, and campaign approach in order to better understand how to mobilize different voter segments. ■



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