



THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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- How does social media shape youth engagement and political awareness in North Macedonia?
- In what ways does social media contribute to polarization and disinformation, including the lessons of the Veles case?
- How are political parties and institutions using social media, and what implications does this have for democratic governance?

Problem Definition and Significance

Over the past two decades, the proliferation of digital technologies has dramatically transformed political communication worldwide. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (now known as X), and TikTok are no longer peripheral tools but central arenas where political actors, citizens, and external stakeholders compete to frame public debates. For small and transitional democracies like North Macedonia, this transformation carries both promise and peril. As the country seeks to consolidate democratic governance and align with the European Union (EU), the role of digital communication in shaping political culture has become a matter of urgent concern. The importance

of social media in North Macedonia lies in the country's unique political and social context. With a population of just over 1.8 million and a highly diverse ethnic composition, public debates are often structured along identity-based lines.

Political elites have long relied on ethnic narratives to mobilize support, and social media has amplified these tendencies by allowing rapid dissemination of partisan and emotionally charged content. At the same time, social media has empowered ordinary citizens, particularly young people, to participate in political discourse outside the control of traditional media outlets and political parties. Yet this double-edged character of social media poses challenges for democratic stability. On the one hand, plat-

forms facilitate civic engagement and give marginalized voices new opportunities for visibility. On the other hand, they also foster disinformation, hate speech, and polarization. The infamous “Veles case” of 2016, when hundreds of fake news websites operated from a small town in North Macedonia reached global audiences during the U.S. presidential election, revealed both the vulnerability of the digital ecosystem and the global reach of local actors. While that episode highlighted North Macedonia’s unexpected role in global debates on disinformation, similar dynamics continue to influence domestic politics today.

Another defining factor is the weakness of institutions. Independent journalism struggles under political and financial pressures, public trust in media is in decline, and regulatory frameworks for online campaigning remain underdeveloped. Against this backdrop, social media has become not only a communication tool but also a battlefield where competing forces—political parties, civil society, foreign actors, and ordinary citizens—strive to influence perceptions and shape outcomes. This Perspective focuses on three critical dimensions of this issue. First, it examines how social media shapes youth engagement and political awareness in North Macedonia, highlighting both opportunities and risks. Second, it analyzes the role of social media in intensifying polarization and spreading disinformation, with particular attention to the lessons of the Veles case. Third, it explores how political

parties and institutions utilize social media, and the broader implications this has for democratic governance. By analyzing these areas, the study seeks to provide a balanced account of social media’s impact and to propose policy recommendations aimed at enhancing the resilience of North Macedonia’s democratic system.

Youth Engagement and Political Awareness

Young people are the most active demographic on social media in North Macedonia. According to the Institute of Communication Studies (2024), more than 85% of youth aged 18–29 use Facebook and Instagram daily, while TikTok has rapidly gained ground among high school and university students. These platforms are their primary sources of entertainment, social interaction, and increasingly, political information. However, the manner in which political content is consumed is often passive. The ICS survey revealed that a majority of young users encounter political messages incidentally—while scrolling through their feeds—rather than by actively seeking information about policies, elections, or governance. This pattern of passive consumption has important implications. While it increases exposure to political debates, it does not necessarily translate into greater political literacy or informed participation. Instead, it risks reducing politics to fragments of slogans, memes, or sensational headlines, divorced from deeper context.

Such habits are consistent with broader global findings on youth and social media, where exposure to political content does not automatically enhance critical engagement.

Despite these concerns, social media has undeniably opened new avenues for youth activism. In recent years, digital platforms have played a central role in organizing protests, mobilizing public opinion, and amplifying youth concerns. Movements such as *#Protestiram* in 2015, which opposed government corruption and authoritarian tendencies, demonstrated the power of social media to unite young people around civic causes. Similarly, environmental protests in 2019 and student campaigns for better university conditions have relied heavily on Facebook groups, Instagram campaigns, and Twitter hashtags to mobilize participants. These cases illustrate the empowering potential of digital platforms. For many young Macedonians who feel excluded from formal political processes due to weak party representation or lack of trust in institutions social media provides an alternative space for political expression. This aligns with global trends where digital activism has become a defining characteristic of youth politics. Moreover, the constant exposure to competing and often misleading narratives can foster confusion and cynicism. In a context where disinformation circulates widely, many young Macedonians report feeling unsure about what sources to trust. This erosion

of trust in information sources may lead to political apathy, where citizens disengage from the political process altogether. If youth begin to view all political content as equally unreliable, they risk withdrawing from civic life rather than becoming empowered participants.

One of the structural factors behind these risks is the lack of systematic media literacy education. While some NGOs and civil society initiatives have piloted programs in schools, these efforts remain fragmented and underfunded. The formal education system has yet to institutionalize digital literacy as a core component of civic education. As a result, young people enter the digital sphere without the necessary tools to evaluate credibility, identify manipulation, or engage critically with political debates. Comparative studies across the Balkans indicate that media literacy is a key determinant of democratic resilience. Countries that have invested in integrating digital literacy into curricula are better equipped to handle disinformation and polarization. For North Macedonia, strengthening media literacy is not simply an educational reform but a democratic imperative. The future of North Macedonia's democracy will depend heavily on how effectively youth engagement is nurtured in the digital era. Social media offers unparalleled opportunities for participation, but without critical literacy, those opportunities may be squandered.

Polarization, Disinformation, and the Veles Case

One of the most significant ways social media influences political communication in North Macedonia is through its algorithmic design. Platforms such as Facebook and TikTok operate on systems that privilege engagement—likes, shares, and comments—over accuracy or balance. As Trajkova and Neshkovska (2018) note, emotionally charged and sensationalist content is more likely to appear prominently in users’ feeds, regardless of its factual accuracy. This structural bias favors divisive political messages, as outrage and fear generate stronger reactions than reasoned debate. During election periods, these dynamics become particularly visible. Campaign strategists deliberately craft provocative narratives designed to go viral, ranging from exaggerated claims about opponents to inflammatory rhetoric on ethnic and religious issues. In a country with a long history of ethnic divisions between Macedonians, Albanians, and other minority groups, such messaging has deepened pre-existing cleavages. Iliev and Petkovska (2022) emphasize that this form of “algorithmic polarization” discourages cross-group dialogue, as individuals increasingly consume content that confirms their existing worldviews while filtering out alternative perspectives. The ethnic dimension of Macedonian politics is especially susceptible to online polarization. Scholars have long observed that political elites in the Balkans often mobilize support through appeals to identity rather than

policy. Social media amplifies this trend by providing fragmented digital spaces where ethnic groups engage primarily with their own community’s narratives. Separate Facebook groups, partisan news pages, and ethnic-based online forums reinforce selective exposure, creating parallel realities for different communities. This environment fosters suspicion and mistrust across ethnic lines. For example, debates about the 2019 Prespa Agreement, which changed the country’s official name to North Macedonia, revealed stark divisions online, with Macedonian nationalists mobilizing heavily on Facebook while Albanian groups focused more on EU and NATO accession benefits. Rather than encouraging constructive debate, social media became a battleground where identity-based narratives clashed, often descending into hate speech.

Perhaps the most infamous illustration of social media’s dangers in North Macedonia is the “Veles case” of 2016. In the months leading up to the U.S. presidential election, the small town of Veles became globally notorious as a hub for fake news production. Hundreds of websites were set up by local entrepreneurs, many of them teenagers, who discovered that sensational pro-Trump stories could generate massive traffic and advertising revenue. Articles such as “Pope Francis Endorses Donald Trump” spread rapidly across Facebook, reaching millions of American voters. The Veles case was initially dismissed as opportunistic “clickbait,” but its consequences were profound. It demonstrated

how local actors in a small Balkan country could shape global political debates, revealing the vulnerabilities of both social media platforms and democratic societies. Subramanian (2017) argued that the case marked a turning point in global awareness about disinformation, forcing platforms like Facebook to acknowledge their role in spreading fake news. For North Macedonia, the Veles episode was a double-edged legacy. On one hand, it placed the country at the center of international debates about digital disinformation. On the other hand, it reinforced stereotypes of the Balkans as a source of instability and manipulation. More importantly, it underscored the absence of domestic safeguards against disinformation. Although the Veles fake news industry was largely dismantled after 2016, disinformation remains a pervasive challenge in North Macedonia. Recent reports by the Center for Investigative Journalism SCOOP Macedonia (2024) document ongoing campaigns, many of which are suspected of being funded by foreign actors seeking to destabilize the country's political trajectory. Topics such as EU integration, NATO membership, and relations with neighboring Greece and Bulgaria are frequent targets of manipulation.

These campaigns are not limited to obscure websites but often circulate widely on Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok. They exploit linguistic divides, using both Macedonian and Albanian to spread tailored messages to different communities. The Balkan Media Barometer (2023) found that public trust in

media is declining partly due to perceptions of bias and manipulation, creating fertile ground for disinformation to thrive. The polarization and disinformation dynamics of social media carry serious consequences for North Macedonia's democratic future. First, they undermine informed citizenship. When voters are bombarded with contradictory and false narratives, they struggle to make rational political decisions. Second, they exacerbate ethnic fragmentation, making cross-community cooperation more difficult at both the political and societal levels. Third, they erode trust in institutions, as citizens increasingly perceive media outlets, political actors, and even democratic processes as manipulated or illegitimate. The Veles case serves as a powerful reminder that disinformation is not only a domestic issue but also a global one. In an interconnected digital environment, the vulnerabilities of one country can have ripple effects far beyond its borders. For North Macedonia, this means that combating disinformation is not merely a matter of national security but also of international credibility, particularly as the country pursues EU membership. Policy implications are clear. Addressing polarization and disinformation requires a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach. This includes aligning regulatory frameworks with EU standards, investing in media literacy education, supporting independent journalism, and fostering cross-ethnic dialogue online. Without such measures, the risks posed by social media to North Macedonia's democratic stability will continue to grow.

Political Parties, Institutions, and Digital Democracy

The rise of social media has fundamentally reshaped how political parties in North Macedonia design and execute their campaigns. Traditionally reliant on television, newspapers, and rallies, parties have increasingly shifted to Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok as primary channels for reaching voters. Data from the Institute of Communication Studies (2024) indicates that over 60% of citizens now say they first encounter campaign messages on social media rather than through traditional outlets. Political parties have adapted accordingly. They invest heavily in targeted advertisements, often micro-targeted to specific age groups, regions, or ethnic communities. For example, during the 2020 parliamentary elections, major parties reportedly spent hundreds of thousands of euros on Facebook ads alone, tailoring messages for urban youth on Instagram while focusing on older demographics through Facebook (Cvetkovski, 2023). TikTok has also emerged as a platform of choice, particularly for youth engagement, with parties posting short, humor-driven videos designed to maximize shares and virality. The ability to bypass traditional media gatekeepers has democratized political communication in some respects, allowing smaller parties and independent candidates to reach broad audiences without the financial backing required for television ads. However, it has also led to a campaign environment characterized more by emotional appeals and

viral content than substantive policy debate. One of the most visible consequences of social media campaigning is the rise of populist rhetoric. Political communication increasingly relies on simple, emotionally resonant messages that can spread quickly online. Spasov and Mladenovska (2021) argue that Macedonian parties use memes, slogans, and symbolic imagery to trigger emotional responses rather than to inform citizens about policies. This emphasis on emotion over substance is not unique to North Macedonia, but its effects are particularly significant in a country where political trust is already fragile. Negative campaigning and attack ads dominate digital discourse, with politicians frequently framing opponents as threats to national identity or stability. Such communication strategies deepen polarization and reduce the possibility of constructive political dialogue. Moreover, the prevalence of disinformation and half-truths in political campaigns blurs the line between persuasion and manipulation. Fact-checking initiatives such as Truthmeter.mk frequently identify misleading claims in party-sponsored content, but these corrections rarely reach the same audiences as the original viral posts. As a result, misinformation often persists unchallenged in the public sphere.

Institutional weakness extends beyond regulation. State bodies lack the technical expertise and resources to systematically track online disinformation or enforce accountability for harmful content. Moreover, existing media regulators often face

political pressures, raising doubts about their impartiality. As a result, the digital campaign environment operates with minimal oversight, allowing political actors wide latitude to experiment with strategies that may harm democratic processes. This lack of regulation also extends to foreign influence. SCOP Macedonia (2024) has documented cases of external actors exploiting online platforms to spread divisive narratives during election campaigns. Without robust monitoring mechanisms, North Macedonia remains vulnerable to foreign disinformation designed to undermine trust in democratic institutions and destabilize its EU integration trajectory.

Another major consequence of the digital transformation of politics is the erosion of public trust. The Balkan Media Barometer (2023) shows that citizens increasingly perceive both traditional and digital media as biased or manipulated. This perception extends to political communication, where many voters view campaign content as propaganda rather than legitimate engagement. The rise of “information cynicism” has profound implications for democracy. When citizens distrust all sources of information equally, they may withdraw from political participation or become more susceptible to populist appeals that claim to “speak directly to the people.” This dynamic is particularly damaging in a fragile democracy like North Macedonia, where democratic consolidation depends on fostering trust in institutions. The decline of independent journalism further exacer-

bates this problem. Many mainstream media outlets remain closely tied to political or business interests, limiting their ability to serve as impartial watchdogs. As social media becomes the dominant source of news, the absence of trusted intermediaries makes citizens more vulnerable to manipulation and deepens skepticism toward all political communication.

Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive reforms that bridge the gap between digital innovation and democratic accountability. First, regulatory frameworks must be updated to reflect the realities of digital campaigning. Transparency in online advertising should be mandated, with clear rules requiring disclosure of sponsors, spending amounts, and target demographics. Second, independent oversight bodies must be strengthened to monitor online political communication. This includes not only state regulators but also partnerships with civil society organizations and international watchdogs. Third, fact-checking initiatives and independent journalism must receive greater institutional and financial support, ensuring that corrective information reaches broad audiences. Finally, parties themselves must be encouraged—or compelled—to adopt more responsible communication strategies. Codes of conduct for online campaigning could help establish norms that prioritize accuracy, discourage hate speech, and promote inclusivity. While enforcement may be challenging, such efforts signal a commitment to democratic values in the digital age.

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Kadrija has over six years of professional experience across the media and communication fields. She worked as a journalist at TRT World, gaining extensive experience in news production, storytelling, and global media reporting. She also worked in the international trade department at FLO A.Ş., where she developed a deep understanding of cross-cultural communication, market dynamics, and global business operations. This diverse professional background informs her academic perspective, allowing her to integrate industry experience with critical theoretical inquiry.

During her undergraduate studies at Ibn Haldun University, she was an active member of various student clubs and academic initiatives, contributing to projects that promoted media literacy, intercultural understanding, and student engagement. She has also participated in numerous voluntary activities across Istanbul, focusing on community development, education, and youth empowerment.

Her current research examines the ethical and social implications of digital platforms, particularly regarding social media bots, digital labor, and the representation of children in influencer culture. Through her interdisciplinary work, she aims to contribute to broader academic discussions on media ethics, public communication, and the sociocultural transformations shaped by digital technologies.

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