Aalborg University

Building Political Cultures through Social Media

MA in Culture, Communication, and Globalization

Student: Alexandru Marinescu
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Supervisor: Ulrik Pram Gad Dragsted

Abstract

The United States 2008 Presidential Elections marked a new beginning in history, not because of the election of Barack Obama, but by being the first time a political campaign has taken place on social media. Since that successful campaign, social media has begun to spread its influence over the people of every country, when talking about transmitting political information or propaganda.

The case study chosen by me, will analyze the Save Romania Union's online political campaign for the 2019 European Parliament Elections. The reason why I've chosen this specific case is that this party, after only existing for 3 years on the political stage, has reached third place in an important political campaign by using mostly Facebook posts in reach for their public. At the same time, the ruling party dropped more than 20% in the polls, while the voting attendance grew with 10% since the last elections. These statistics raised the interest for me as a researcher to identify how these events took place and what are the underlining causes that determined these changes on the Romanian political stage.

This research is concerned with establishing how the use of social media increased the political participation before the 2019 European Parliament Elections. In order to answer the research question, I decided to rely on a qualitative content analysis that investigates the meaning the electorate give to this certain phenomenon.

In this study, I used Roberto Cartocci's political culture theory model and Edward Bernays' propaganda theory to understand the way the Save Romania Union ran their online political campaign and managed to build their group of supporters. In parallel, I will investigate how their interaction with online electorate has influenced major online confrontations between ideologies in their comments section.

The findings indicate that social media campaigns have influence over political participation, not just passively like other types of media, but interactively, by encouraging people to take part into debates and react under the influence of their beliefs. The interactions between users are correlated with the posts but they show how different opinions can spark clashes between them. The cultural background alongside with political beliefs have influenced the way people supporting opposing parties interact. The analysis has revealed a strong correlation between the Facebook posts and the users' presented ideas in their debates. By investigating the way people displayed their personal

beliefs when engaging in controversial subjects, the study revealed that it can no longer be considered a clash of ideologies, because the ideologies have been replaced by political cultures.

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1. Introduction

The growing number of activities of political actors on social media pushed scholars to take this into consideration when trying to understand the dynamics and evolution of the political realm. Since Barack Obama's presidential successful campaign in 2008, social media became one of the main means of communication between political leaders and the people. As scholars suggest, the main reason for its success is the direct contact between the two sides, with less chances of third-party influences as people were used to getting in the case TV media. Statistics show an increased involvement in political life, especially in the case of young people, since the growing use of social media as a communication platform (Paletz et al., 2016, p. 276).

In 2016, the Save Romania Union was founded and took part in the Romanian Parliament Elections which got them 8.92% and third place as the number of seats inside the Parliament. The results showed the poll results as being: PSD - 45.47%, PNL – 20.04%, USR – 8.92% and a total vote participation of 39.49%. Almost three years later, the European Parliament Elections took place which brought a big overthrow in the polls: PNL – 27%, PSD – 22.50%, USR 22.36%, while the participation grew from 39.49% to 49.09% (Kantar & EU, 2019). Therefore, I have chosen as a subject for my study the growth of USR in results and trust in front of the Romanian electorate. The Save Romania Union had a very active and successful political campaign on social media, in preparation for the European Parliament Elections.

My thesis' purpose is to work inside this subject's spectrum and to discover certain connections made on the social media platforms between the two sides, the political leaders and the people. Finding out why is the use of social media for political communication a success represents an important and wide area of study. In order to find answers for that question, studies need to have a large number of different approaches, each one having a scientific basis from different areas. Having the opportunity to choose freely, I decided to go with the area of social sciences, particularly with the study of the dynamics between group interactions and ideologies.

The theory chapter of my thesis will represent the foundation from which my empirical study will take place. Firstly, this chapter will summarise the results of other studies that will reveal a strong relationship between the use of social media and the political participation. Based on this

information, I will indicate the knowledge gap that I intend to fill, through the present study. The theory apparatus will indicate that there is an interdependent relationship between the uses of social media the political engagement. The aim of this thesis is to find out how is one of these variables influencing the other. Secondly, to answer the question, I will take as intuitive knowledge, theories such as Cartocci's political culture theory and Bernays' Propaganda theory, which will lead my study towards the possibility of identifying the act of cultural construction.

Contrasting to a positivist epistemological approach from some of the papers taken into consideration in the theory apparatus, I opt for having an interpretivist approach with the reflection as it being fit for answering this "how" question. By this, I put emphasis on the constructions of meaning people give to the way political parties are portrayed and to their own political participation. Ontologically, I accept the existence of multiple realities, constructed by the active actors of society.

The connection between this study and the theoretical framework presented in the theory apparatus is an inductive one, because the thesis aims to find how social media use influences the political participation. The results of this research can inspire and point out towards new ideas of scientific investigation on this subject.

The research design chosen for this study is the one of the single case study, because it focuses on the 2019 European Parliamentary elections, having the aim of revealing the process of building political identities in Romania with the use of social media and the electorate's responses.

The research asks for qualitative methods to answer its question. Firstly, the study will start by portraying the two political blocs that oppose each other on the political stage through the use of qualitative content analysis on the Facebook posts regarding the European Parliament Elections that took place on the 26th of May, 2019.

Secondly, I will analyse the most relevant comments (determined by the Facebook engine) on the USR's Facebook posts starting from the 26th of February until the day of the elections. This will have the aim to show at first glance, people's perception of the political society, and their actors. The epistemological perspective, by which the analysis will take place, will be influenced by the theory apparatus. I will build a parallel between the two worlds in order to try and identify the

possible similarities, differences, and interconnections. The level of depth of this analysis will depend on the aim pointed out by the theoretical apparatus.

The process of qualitative content analysis will be conducted through the help of "In Vivo" coding. The narratives will be developed with the use of the identified codes from the chosen samples. The strategy and process of choosing the codes within the analysis will be presented in the methodology chapter alongside the construction of the coding framework.

The findings will try to explain how the use of social media can influence political participation. The conclusion will indicate a build of a number of pillars on which, future studies might help construct a new theory in social sciences.

2. Methodology

Methodology represents the technical foundation on which my thesis will unfold, starting from the problem formulation to the establishment of a most fitting and helpful coding framework for completing my qualitative content analysis. In this chapter, I will present a step-by-step plan of the stages that will lead me towards solving the identified problem.

2.1 Ontology and Epistemology

Firstly, I will define my ontological and epistemological positions in order to make a clear image of the points of departure for my study.

The structural paradigm that supports this research is based on the idea that I am trying to understand and interpret one of the multiple realities constructed by existing social actors. This paper will not be aiming at discovering a one-dimensional and rigid reality, but the world as shaped and perceived by Save Romania Union (USR). The way I chose to understand the reality constructed by USR is by viewing the world through the interpretivist perspective (Bryman, 2012, p. 33).

Taking a relativist ontological stance enables the science responsible with the studies of the nature of being to focus on the reality constructed by the social entities that continuously participate and interact with each other. Reality is established by the actions and perceptions of these participants (Bryman, 2012 in Dudovskiy, 2016, para. 4).

This study is focused on the subjective nature, the conceptualization of meaning, the way people perceive a social phenomenon, which implies that multiple realities may coexist and influence each other in either a conflictual or harmonious manner. The aim of this study is to examine the reality constructed by Save Romania Union in their campaign for the 2019 European Parliament Elections. USR tried to plea for their cause and gain more supporters since their last Parliament Elections they participated in 2016. The research will also take into consideration the reality perceived by the people that interacted with USR and reacted to their social media posts by participating on online discussions. This thesis will analyze the political campaign ran through Facebook posts through the qualitative content analysis method, for the reason that reality is forged through the use of language and interactions between social actors (Scotland, 2012, p. 11).

From the epistemological stand point I decided to start from the Weberian concept of "Verstehen" which implies that what I consider acceptable knowledge is how people understand how the world around them works. Therefore, my study is focused on the meaning that people give to social phenomena, in this case, Save Romania Union's meaning of the world that surrounds them, and concomitant with the electorate's reactions towards their perspective (Bryman, 2012, p. 30).

According to Dudovskiy (2016) there are four types of sources of knowledge: intuitive, authoritarian, logical and empirical, which are a must to identify in any study in order to have a good process of research (Dudovskiy, 2016, para. 2).

I will incorporate all four types of knowledge in this thesis in order to portray a good image of what I consider acceptable knowledge to be. The intuitive knowledge has its source in the meanings given by Save Romania Union to the world around them while preparing for the 2019 European Parliament Elections. Furthermore, the information gained from the responses of the electorate towards USR's social media posts represents the alternative reality that I wish to analyze in order to find out how it compares to the one portrayed by the political party.

Secondly, the authoritarian knowledge is represented by the information collected in this paper's Theory Apparatus, which portrays the theoretical framework that will guide my analysis process. For the sake of understanding how the use of social media increased the political participation before the 2019 European Parliament Elections, the study must encompass a solid theoretical foundation, with theoretical ideas resulted from works in social media and political participation, propaganda and political culture.

The knowledge produced by the analysis of the collected secondary data from the Facebook platform will serve as the third type of knowledge. The logical knowledge will be represented by the constructed narratives, based on the qualitative content analysis of the Facebook posts and comments.

The knowledge gained through the logical process will lead to the forth type of knowledge, empirical knowledge. This last stage of gaining knowledge will portray the connection between the two established realities: the world portrayed by the Save Romania Union and the way the world is understood by the social media users.

This thesis has an interpretivist approach that uses an inductive scheme to apply qualitative methods, like the qualitative content analysis, which should discover the way political participation in Romania of 2019 has being boosted by the use of social media.

2.2 Limitations

Even though I am dedicated to staying within my ontological and epistemological perspective while conducting this study, I consider that it is equally important to be fully aware of the implicit limitations of my academic venture. The constructivist paradigm I chose to apply regarding this research automatically implies that this is only one of the possible ways to decipher the connection between social media and political participation (Bryman, 2012, p. 33).

Taking the choice of this epistemology into account, there are also entailed limitations that go alongside with it. The choices of knowledge implicitly bring limitations to the numerous possibilities of the results of a study. In order to answer the research question, a researcher could choose from a number of perspectives, guiding knowledge and plans of execution for the analysis. Furthermore, I am cognizant that the authoritarian knowledge selected to guide my study will set the results to be easily considered as a purely subjective. Therefore, whatever knowledge my research will generate, it will not represent a singular and absolute truth, but only my perspective as a researcher.

2.3 Problem Statement and Problem Formulation

The Save Romania Union party got registered as an official party in 2016. Its creation was motivated by its leaders as a necessity to change the political class on the Romanian stage. According to the statistics, USR got on their first election chase in the Romanian Local Administration Elections, which brought them 1.3% of the local councils nationwide. The second Elections they took part in was the Romanian Parliament Elections in December 2016, which installed them as the third successful party at the finish line, with 8.92% (after PSD – 45.47% and PNL – 20.04%). In this case, it is important to state that the electorate presence was of 39.49%, a lower value from the Romanian Parliament Elections from 2012 (41.76%) (EurActiv.ro, 2016).

Since the start of development of political campaigns on social media (2008 – US, Obama Campaign) and continuing with a lot of results along the years (2016 – Trump Campaign), this type of political marketing has spread all around the globe until nowadays. The results of the 2014

Romanian Presidential Elections has changed the face of political marketing in Romania by introducing social media as a platform for spreading political ideologies and raising political awareness, especially for the younger generation. The emancipation of social media on the political tool repertoire. Since 2014 social media was excessively used for raising awareness about the political situation in Romania. The 2019 European Parliament Elections showed a big change in the statistics of political preferences among the voters. The results were: PNL – 27%, PSD – 22.50%, USR 22.36%, which indicated a massive increase in support for USR and a downfall for PSD, while the number of active voters grew from 39.49% (2016) to 49.09% (2019) (Kantar & EU, 2019). These facts raise questions of how did these changes occur, and the present thesis will attempt to answer these questions and try to contribute towards a new possible direction when studying social media and political communication.

The research questions that guide my study are as follows:

How did the use of Social Media increase the Romanian people's political participation before the 2019 European Parliament Elections?

- *How did the Save Romania Union build their base of supporters in preparation for the 2019 European Parliament Elections?*
- *How did the electorate present their political culture from the way they perceive the two political opposing blocs (USR & PSD), in preparation for the 2019 European Parliament Elections?*

2.4 Theoretical Paradigm

This research needed an educated paradigm through which the answers to the questions raised were to be answered in the most relevant and conclusive of ways. For this, I selected a series of theoretical approaches in order to form the right framework that would guide the analysis of this study. The tool created by the combined ideas from the chosen theoretical collection will help explain the connection between the use of social media and the growth in political participation by the Romanian electorate. This theoretical framework that will be portrayed in the Theory Apparatus encompasses ideas from the following list:

- Political Participation & Social Media
- Propaganda

- Political Culture.

2.5 Case Study and Qualitative Content Analysis:

The research design of this thesis focuses on a single case study that brings into attention a well-constructed approach to examine a phenomenon with its contextual surroundings through a qualitative analysis method. Engaging in the analysis through an explanatory manner will help me identify and possibly classify the relationship between social media and political participation in the case of the online campaign conducted by the Save Romania Union (Bryman, 2012, p. 66).

In order to describe the underlining condition that allowed social media to increase political participation, I started from the idea of building identities of meaning through the use of narratives (Somers, 1994). The choice of qualitative content analysis as the main method of research is the most appropriate one in order to discover the meanings behind the political narratives of USR. Even though the analysis will start with the process of building a coding framework based on numbers which will indicate the importance of specific words, the building of narratives of meaning will continue under a qualitative form. I consider this approach to be most appropriate because it shows the meaning that both USR and the electorate give to the world around them (Bryman, 2012, p. 582).

The aim of this research is not to generalize on the theories of political communication methods used on social media in order to increase the number of political supporters, but to establish a possible method that might have determined the changes in political ranking, by paying a closer attention to the online campaign of the Save Romania Union.

2.6 Purposive Sampling

In order to answer the research question most appropriately I chose purposive sampling as the philosophy of selecting the right data for analysis. For the sake of being able to coordinate the two worlds, I went for selecting the secondary data from the same environment. Therefore, I will analyze secondary data obtained from the social media platform, Facebook, which provides me with the necessary narratives in order to understand the way Save Romania Union and the interactive users see the two intersecting realities (Bryman, 2012, p. 418).

Even though, my ideal intentions are to getting a holistic image of how the interaction between users and the authors of the Facebook posts realized to have raised the numbers regarding political

participation and pro-voters, I will choose only a small part of the high number of possibilities of sources. My choices of sources are represented by what I believe are the main origins of impact such as official pages or influencers pages. In this case, I elected the official Facebook page of the Save Romania Union and the official page of the alliance made by USR with the Freedom, Unity and Solidarity Party (PLUS).

Regarding of temporal boundaries, I have selected posts dating 3 months prior to the date of the election (since the 26th of February until the 26th of May), since the day that the political public campaign for the 2019 European Parliament Elections started.

In order for the samples to be considered the most beneficial for identifying the relationship between the two worlds, I preferred the posts that had more than 50 comments and 50 distributions so that I can observe the interaction between the authors of the posts and the users/electorate. Due to the large number of comments that some posts might have (ranging from 50 to 5000) and for a better triage of the comments that are considered the most beneficial, I opted for the Facebook engine to show only the most relevant comments. Another reason for using the Facebook engine is that, "the most relevant" option is a standard one and it classifies which comments are easier to be viewed by other users.

To sum up, the purposive sampling process is the following:

- The two official Facebook pages of the party: Uniunea Salvati Romania & Alianta USR PLUS
- Posts starting from the 26th of February
- Posts are relevant if the number of comments surpasses 50 and 50 distributions.
- Only the most relevant comments selected by the Facebook engine are taken into consideration.

The full collected data (both the posts and comments) will be in a separate document - Data Appendix.

2.7 Coding Framework

In order to conduct an effective qualitative content analysis, there is a need for creating a coding framework to guide the analysis efforts. This scheme will assist me into discovering the narratives

built by the Save Romania Union and compare it to the perspective owned by the Facebook users that interacted with the party's online posts. With high hopes, I will form this framework for filling the knowledge gap on answering how social media can improve political participation.

The coding framework is designed by containing three layers (from top to bottom):

- Themes
- Categories
- Codes

The process of construction of the coding framework starts from selecting themes and categories using as inspiration the theory apparatus. The codes that are correspondent to these elements are searched through the collected data. In case that the investigation of the samples unravels different codes, which concomitantly will alter the categories and themes, a process of reconstruction is needed. The newly preferred themes and categories implies that a fresh search pursuit for codes to take place. If there are no new discoveries that could radically   transform the coding framework, the stage of creating the narratives may commence. The procedure of designing the right coding framework is, therefore, an iterative one that is both theory and data-driven.

Even though, I start building the framework from the themes and continuing with categories, the codes are the actual core of it. My qualitative content analysis will be based on using "In Vivo" coding. The social researcher, Saldana, (2013) points out that "In Vivo" signifies "in that which is alive" and indicates to "a word or a short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record" (Saldana, 2013, p. 91). Through the use of "In Vivo" coding as the main tool for my analysis, I am aiming to identify the interconnection between USR and its supporters, as well as the type of relationship between social media and political participation.

3. Theory Apparatus

The theory chapter of my thesis holds a double purpose. On one hand, the thought process that inspired the subject of my thesis needs a level of acknowledgement so that its problem statement and problem formulation can be considered appropriate due to former discoveries or studies. Before asking a *how* question we need a bit of proof that there is a process or a case to be studied. In this case, I decided to look for information regarding political participation and if there are any studies in the past that can confirm that there is a connection between it and social media. Furthermore, I questioned if social media can influence offline political participation, because voting turnout and political success is the ultimate purpose of running a political campaign.

On the other hand, the paradigm that guides my analysis requires a theoretical framework for determining the answers to the research question and sub-questions. Cartocci's model of understanding political culture alongside with Bernays' propaganda theory have the aim to decipher the meanings behind the narratives presented by the Save Romania Union. Furthermore, the framework will also develop the analysis of the users' comments on the political messages posted by USR. Lastly, a comparison between the two realities will take place and seek for an answer to the problem formulation by settling on a conclusion. Both roles of the theory apparatus have been highlighted through the use of introductory questions before presenting each concept.

3.1 What is political participation? Does social media influence political participation?

Hutter & Lorenzini (2017) define *political participation* as all intended acts made by citizens in order to impact political events. The area of activities included as political participation, mainly focused on voting and electoral turnout in the 1950s, has grown with a great number of actions nowadays such as: taking part in the campaigns, signing petitions, attending political manifestations, participating in public political debates or confrontational protests (Hutter & Lorenzini, 2017, p. 621).

Theocharis (2014) refers to *political participation* as being any type of social activity that is intended to influence government offices and the policy mechanisms, or to affect the civil society by regulating models of social conduct. The people's behavior has the power to induce government

actions either by pushing for the establishment of certain policies or by persuading political actors to support the implementation of those certain policies. The author also states that the action of participating in public political debates is a good opportunity to express their concerns, desires or needs. Furthermore, he argues that in the 21st Century, political participation has spread its range in the digital dimension by taking part in social media activities such as Twitter or Facebook. The acts of political interactions performed in offline society can transcend in the online environment simply because of the digital connection between the actual electorate and the political actors (Theocharis, 2014). He takes into account the fact that some scholars do not include social media activities in the political participation sphere because they consider that online participation is not as active as the offline one and due to its superficial characteristics, it is irrelevant (Gladwell, 2010 in Theocharis, 2014, p. 3).

However, studies, that test the existence of a link between the use of social media and turnout statistics, have been made. Gil de Zuniga et al. (2012) argues that one's political participation is related to each individual's process of personal identity construction. He pinpoints towards a study made by Katz and Gurevitch (1974) which concluded that people use media for surveillance, personal identity development, social relationships and entertainment. Furthermore, the researcher indicates that social media is in the process of possibly replacing 'the old' media regarding the construction of personal identity due to its high use and influence observed over the past few years. The process of identity construction consists in creating an online profile that contains personal information, preferences, values followed by interacting with other people that went through the same process. Platforms, such as Facebook, offer the opportunity to people of same interests or tastes to interact with each other, by communicating or by reacting to certain subjects, articles or sets of information. This interactive way of consuming and reacting to information has changed the way media affects people's political participation. Therefore, media is no longer a static entity that feeds people information through a uni-directional channel but, a dynamic entity that evolves based on people's online activities and interactions (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2012, pp. 320, 321).

Knoll et al. (2018) present social media as an important platform for political participation. The researchers focus on how the personalized use of social media affects the social media influence over the users themselves (Knoll et al., 2018). The studies, displayed by the researchers, emphasize how political participation varies according to the users' motivation and behavior towards political

subjects. Social media platforms offer an easy opportunity for people to interact with political subjects and based on the social media technical mechanisms (i.e. cookies), users interact with such subjects increasingly more if they willingly showed interest for such affairs. Furthermore, even the users who've shown little interest to politics would get incidentally exposed to it, because of the social circles. The social circles include people connected to political figures' networks which helps spread any political information incidentally to the non-connected users. Online political participation is influenced by the exposure to political actors' posts (Tang & Lee, 2013 in Knoll et al., 2018, pp. 2, 3).

Knoll et al. base their social media use studies on psychological theories with reference to the 'goal oriented behavior theory' launched by Kruglanski et al. (2015) and the "appraisal theory" of Lazarus (1991) (Knoll et al., 2018, p. 5). In the researchers view, people's actions are driven by the desire to satisfy their needs, such as the need to be informed about a political issue. On social media, the users have the freedom to choose specific content for their own gratification. Thus, the use of social media can well be recognized as a goal-oriented platform. In order to find out what motivates each user to use social media, as researchers, we need to take into consideration the psychological aspect. Firstly, motivation is a state of being that pushes an individual to act towards the outcome of satisfying a need. Secondly, people's needs are rooted inside their own psyche, which encloses the biological mental characteristics alongside their personal and situational demeanors. In this group of attributes, the most influential ones are the personality traits, the emotional states, gender, age, or the personal perceptions and judgments formed on individual experience (Rosengren, 1974 in Knoll et al., 2018). Moreover, the need for gratification is one of the main reasons people expose themselves to media, including social media (Rubin, 2009 in Knoll et al., 2018). Knoll's et al. studies with the hypothesis in which social media is viewed as a "goal-oriented" platform, have discovered that people who use it as a gratifying tool, based on their needs, tend to get attached to it because of its easy usability (Knoll et al., 2018, p. 15).

Mazaheri et al. (2011) argues what psychologists considered about consumers that emotions are an important ingredient as far as human responses when interacting with the environment and the way it guides their behavior (Hull & Harvey, 1989 in Mazaheri et al., 2011, p. 959). On that matter, online users perceive information and build attitudes towards it, depending on the newly created emotional state, caused by the initial exposure to it. Therefore, the affective reactions are a strong

influence towards their choices and behavior for response. There are three types of emotions: pleasure, arousal and dominance. *Pleasure* is the level of emotion which brings joy, happiness, wellness or satisfaction. *Arousal* represents emotions of feeling stimulated or motivated to act on something, while *dominance* is the stage where a user feels power, independence/autonomy, and control. The first two levels are known and influential during the old media age, while the *dominance* level became imperial in the age of social media, due to the sentiment of power and control the users feel when they get to respond to what they interacting with. All in all, emotions are an important factor to online political participation because of the possibility to respond to the information users get in contact with (Mazaheri et al., 2011).

To sum up, political participation involves a number of activities within the political area, regardless of the environment or the platform that offers the opportunity for these to take place. Social media platforms are a good example of environments that supports political discussion, debates or other acts, such as opinion polls. The relationship between political participation and social media involvement is an area that lacks theoretical models, but there are a number studies that suggest that the focus should be on the psychological processes determining this relationship (Knoll et al., p. 16).

3.2 Does the exposure to social media influence offline political participation?

Conroy et al. (2012) conducted a study with the aim to finding out if there is a correlation between social networks usage and offline political participation. Firstly, their study points out that Facebook groups can flourish based on having a common interest and eventually influence political participation. Facebook's success is grounded in their action of creating new technological ways for people to interact virtually on any everyday topics. Secondly, Conroy's et al. case study of the 2008 United States Presidential Elections concluded that online political groups can produce as many contributions to the political area of the society as the offline organizations do. The researchers established that Facebook nourishes political engagement because it offers knowledge, motivation for political implication and activities, and foremost a prosperous environment for political dialogue and debates. The last aim of their study was to find out the level of depth regarding the correlation in political participation between the two dimensions. The variable chosen by the researchers was the level of political knowledge offered by the two worlds. Their method revealed that there is a large discrepancy between the numbers

offered by the two dimensions regarding the quality of the political knowledge. The information found on the walls of online political groups was biased and offered a poor quality of details, with a lack of sources. Conroy et al. suggested that the dissimilarity between the two levels of political knowledge asks for further studies on finding out what are the implications of using Facebook groups as a mean to staying connected with the political area (Conroy et al., 2012, p. 1544).

The case study ran by Muntean (2015), regarding the impact of social media on offline political participation, has revealed that the online platform has raised awareness among the young generation about the political issues preceding the 2014 Romanian Presidential Elections and increased the figures of political participation. The researcher concluded that the nature of Facebook, as an interactive social media platform, is the reason for the increase in numbers of young people's political consumption and their active involvement in the political sphere (Muntean, 2015, p. 82).

3.3 Cartocci's Political Culture study model

The International Encyclopedia of Political Science (2011) defines *political culture* as a range of scientific models that empower people from a society to portray themselves as political actors, to connect with other political actors and to interact with the institutional framework inside which they exist. Within this scientific scheme, the people from a certain community can determine what their mission or ambition is and eventually, devise the most suitable action plan for achieving it (Cartocci, 2011). According to Cartocci (2011), a political culture thrives if it is a common heritage constructed over a longer time period, sometimes with gained maturity. Furthermore, it represents a living proof of the represented people's survival instinct through its own set of internal rules and compilation of established problem solutions. The transmission of the culture's elements is based on the path set by the members of the community and keeps everyone posted through socialization, even the newest of members (Cartocci, 2011, p. 2).

In order to understand how political culture works, social scientists have agreed on the existence of two types of components: *cognitive* and *evaluative*. The cognitive model refers to the people's objective and rational perception of how the world works and how society is structured internally. The evaluative model invokes the way members of a society associate themselves with certain representative values, through which they give meaning to the world around them (Cartocci, 2011, p. 2).

Edgard Schein portrays political culture as being cultivated and practiced unconsciously by its carriers and consumers, in other words, these models can also be described simply as "assumptions taken for granted", or common sense. Common sense dictates individuals from a certain political culture what is the natural way to give meaning to politics, its actors and their actions. Anthropologists consider political culture as a mental construct of these assumptions built upon experience with everyday challenges. In other words, this concept does not get formed naturally, but artificially, thanks to the environment the political actors live in (Cartocci, 2011, p. 2).

Political culture is further characterized as a mature construct that was built over a long period of time through its community's collective experiences. Anthropologists agreed that it is difficult to identify how far long does a political culture had its inception, due to its connections with the processes of institutional, economic and social change. Moreover, political culture incorporates all perceptions, judgements, points of view and prejudices towards political actors and institutions into a uniform compilation of influential mental pylons (Cartocci, 2011, p. 2).

The first time the idea of a 'political culture' was formed was in the 1950s by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, who wanted to research how cultures influence the development of political ideologies, that people from a certain nation live by. In their work, "The Civic Culture", Almond & Verba portray the stability and efficiency of democratic systems through the analysis of people's cultural orientation and attitudes towards democracy such as: their civic virtues, their values, their feelings of identity and responsibility towards their duties (Almond & Verba, 1963, in Cartocci, 2011, p. 3).

Wessels (2018) argues for the importance of culture in shaping an individual's social life, also how politics can influence cultural elements. The author pleads for the existence of a circular influential process between 'politics - culture - society' which enables the idea that through this channel, observing people's behavior and evolution inside a society can help create a new political culture based on the way members interact culturally and politically (Wessels, 2018, p. 81).

In order to create the right model for studying political culture, the research must take into consideration the analytical sources that foster social sciences. Max Webber's studies in Sociology point out the origin of an authority's legitimacy in front of the individual living in a society. The individual's actions are guided by one's values; values are determined by the constant argument

between ideas originated from one's personal goals with the ideas that portray communal benefits. In his perspective, authority can be supported by three types of confidence: the traditional type of rule, based on past experiences, the belief in established and trustworthy institutions, and the faith in a single charismatic figure (Cartocci, 2011, p. 3).

3.4 Edward Bernays' Propaganda Theory

The democratic society has been organized in such a way as to allow a minor contingent of people with leadership skills who use their understanding of the social patterns and mental processes of the masses to control public opinion (Bernays, 1928, pp. 9, 10).

As a democratic society, it was agreed that it would be more efficient and practical to have those who are in possession of the facts to help showcase the most pressing issues, allowing for a more narrow selection by the masses. Voting was made easier by narrowing down candidates to political parties rather than individuals. The parties then advocated for policies or ideals in an effort to capture the interest of the people (Bernays, 1928, pp. 10, 11).

In order for the ideas or agendas of those in charge to gain popularity they used propaganda. Society has permitted the use of propaganda as a means for political parties to compete against one another. In an effort to gain favor with the people while simultaneously boycotting competitors, political leaders have sometimes misused propaganda by manipulating their image in the media and further, in the eyes of the public (Bernays, 1928, p. 12). The term propaganda has been used extensively to refer to the nefarious manipulation of the masses through false or altered information, even though propaganda is also used to raise awareness and gain support for a just cause. Propaganda is neither good nor bad, only a method in which individuals disseminate an idea or belief to the public (Bernays, 1928, pp. 20, 22). Propaganda is used both in favor and against a topic by individuals whose' perspectives differ, as in the case of political parties who would try and convince the public that their view is better than their opponent (Bernays, 1928, p. 31).

Information can be transmitted across the globe in an instant. And that information can be shared by people all over the world regardless of borders. Propaganda is the main tool used by individuals to raise awareness and support for a cause or belief on a large scale. However, propaganda is not only used by political leaders but also by people in a variety of fields, such as charity, education, religion, finance, etc., when dealing with issues of social importance. Because of this, propaganda

has been used to further the influence of an idea not just to local groups but to a worldwide audience. (Bernays, 1928, p. 13).

Propaganda is so widespread that we encounter it on a daily basis. Any organization that publicizes its ideology in any form is engaged in propaganda. It is an instrument that governs the population, it creates order and focuses attention towards issues, products, and beliefs. Propaganda is extensively used in marketing, political elections, petitions etc. (Bernays, 1928, pp. 12, 22, 25).

If someone noticed a rising need among the public or a sense of unrest and offers a solution that speaks to the average person, then they can easily manipulate the mind of many and sway them in their favor. Such as in politics, one does not need to be the most qualified or the most experienced, but by having insight into the people's issues they can use their prejudices for their own gain and influence the masses to further their political agenda (Bernays, 1928, p. 25). For example, the mass majority of British citizens had no understanding of Brexit and what it entailed, and yet a majority voted in favor of it because they were influenced by the media that immigrants were coming to take their jobs and they had to do something about it. Propaganda was the leading factor in the misinformation of the public about Brexit and the reason behind it (Vanbergen, 2016). The influence a person or group has also depends on the level of authority they possess or if they have succeeded in gaining the trust of the people (Bernays, 1928, p. 24).

Because of propaganda anyone with a strong idea and public approval can persuade the crowd towards any objective (Bernays, 1928, pp. 26, 27). E. Bernays explained it very well by saying that "*propaganda sees the individual not only as a cell in the social organism but as a cell organized into the social unit. Touch a nerve at a sensitive spot and you get an automatic response from certain specific members of the organism*" (Bernays, 1928, p. 28). When an idea spreads to the public and influences a large enough group they have the power to change the world, and the minority in charge has no choice but to concede (Bernays, 1928, pp. 25, 30).

4. Analysis

4.1 Introduction to the Coding Framework

The Analysis chapter is organized under the guidance of the two sub-questions, because each of them represents a narrated reality, portrayed individually thanks to the coding framework table. Therefore, the code values in the coding framework are split in two columns. The first value column will show the number of times a certain code appeared in the selected Facebook posts, while the second column will do the same with the ones from the users' comments.

As mentioned previously in the Methodology chapter, the scheme was created due to an iterative process that took place by using the theory apparatus as a starting point for building its core, and eventually, it received modifications thanks to the discovered codes within a new context. The core elements of the framework have their basis in the political culture theory's elements. Firstly, the *themes* are chosen in accordance with the theoretical framework and they guide the main perspective through which the codes are being selected (e.g. Sense of national identity, Self-image as a political participant, View over fellow citizens, Perspective on Government, Knowledge about the political process). Secondly, I have elected the *categories* based on the identified codes and tried to integrate them inside the *thematic* system according to their meaning and context. The smallest element is the *code*, which can be represented by singular words or a phrase. The frequency of used codes will indicate: what are the narratives from Save Romania Union's campaign posts and from the users' comments more focused on.

My analysis will portray the narratives presented in the two realities through a qualitative interpretation of the frequency of the used codes within each correspondent context.

The discussion following the analysis will make a comparison between the two worlds in question and will interpret the similarities, differences or the influences between them. This part of the analysis will attempt to answer the main research question, which hopefully will shed some light over the phenomenon and will inspire towards research on a deeper level regarding the subject of social media's influence over political participation.

Codes	In main posts	In comments
SENSE OF NATIONAL IDENTITY		
Culture		
Romania/ romani (*Romanian*)	107	258
Europa/ European(a) (*European*)	38	112
Patriot	1	22
Community feeling		
Tara (country)	10	203
Diaspora	4	21
Copii (*children*)	4	61
Tineri (*young people*)	-	54
Nepoti (*nephews*)	-	38
Radacini (*roots*)	1	4
Social practices		
Alegeri (*elections*)	38	55
Politic/ politician (*politics*)	27	113
Protest	2	11
Vot/ votare/ voteze* (*voting*)	43	556
Propaganda	4	18 ^
SELF-IMAGE AS A POLITICAL PARTICIPANT		
Protagonists		
USR*	71	440
PSD (*Rulling party's name*)*	57	420
Values		
Experienta/ expert	6	9
Bine (*good*)	13	-
Putere (*strength*)	9	37

Call to Action		
Lupta/ milita (*fight*)	5	8
Ajuta (*help*)	2	30
VIEW OVER FELLOW CITIZENS		
Values		
Decent/ decenți	2	8
Cinstit (*fairness*)	8	15
Competenți (*competent*)	7	5
Bun/ Bunastare (*good*/*wellfare*)	3	5
Interaction		
Postac (*paid supporter*)	-	41
USR*	-	440
PSD (*Rulling party's name*)	-	420
Ignorant/ ignoranta (*ignorance*)	-	6
Minciuni/ mincinos (*lies*)*	-	76
Prost/prostie (*stupid*)	-	84 ^
Comunist	1	50
Securiști (*state militia*)	-	47
Trădător (traitor)	-	49 ^
Hoti/ hotie* (*thieving*)	-	71 ^
PERSPECTIVE ON GOVERNMENT		
Rule of man		
Hoti/ hotie* (*thieving*)	21	71
Abuz (*abuse*)	12	11
Coruptie (*corruption*)	13	17
Imunitate (*immunity*)	2	14
PSD (*Rulling party's name*)	57	420

Ignora (*ignore*)	2	-
Putere* (*power*)	2	46
Furt (*stealing*)	9	63
Infractiuni (*crime/felony*)	8	18
Nepregatiti (*unprepared*)	1	-
Mandrie (*pride*)	3	1
Penal (*criminal*)	22	21
Saboteze (*sabotage*)	1	5
Manipulare (*manipulation*)	1	34
Nedemocratic (*Undemocratic*)	6	-
Dragnea (*leader's name*)	28	49
Output		
Nimic (*Nothing*)*	7	128
Vorbe goale (*empty words*)	1	3
Retete invechite (*old system*)	1	-
Fara realizari (*no achievement*)	1	9
Rau (*evil*)	2	9
Liberalism de tinichea (*fake liberalism*)	1	7
OUG (*Government Emergency ordinance*)	3	4
Minciuni/ mincinos*	1	76
Frauda (*Fraud*)	3	10
KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE POLITICAL PROCESS		
Rule of law		
Vot/ votare/ voteze* (*voting*)	43	556
Referendum	25	55
Justitie (*justice*)	23	11
Europarlamentar (*EU Parliament*)	32	39

Lege (*law*)	6	36
Protejare (*protection*)	4	4
Reguli (*rules*)	4	6
Anticoruptie (*anti-corruption*)	2	1
Respect	4	43
Parlament (*Parliament*)	15	103
Drept (*Right*)	9	39

4.2 The world in the view of The Save Romania Union

The reality presented by the Facebook posts focuses mainly on a constructed dichotomy between Save Romania Union (USR) and Social-Democrat Party (PSD) which appear to have the two main roles in an electoral thriller. The plot of the "story" is centered on the fight for power in a political society, but it is portrayed as a fight of *good vs. evil*. The reason why this is an important factor when establishing the rapport in the Romanian society is that Romania is still considered a conservative/religious country, where the Orthodox Church has a slightly administrative power, also influence over the people's culture. Therefore, the people assimilated the belief in the eternal fight of *good vs. evil* from the Christian teachings (Sandor & Popescu, 2008, pp. 171-172).

In this context, the number of codes representing the two main protagonists are in a 56-44% ratio, USR with 71, while PSD with 57 mentions. The close to balance ratio confirms the existence of the two equally important characters in the story. The Social-Democrat Party is the ruling party, shown by the statistics from the Parliament elections in 2016 (45%), and it is seen by the Save Romania Union as a Government representation, in its identity and performance. USR portrays two images: *how things should be, and that they intend to make them so* compared to *how things are because of the ruling party*.

They present to the people the unity of how the society is and should be in essence through the use of the word *Romanians*, every time they address the presumed readers of the posts. It is the most used word in the selected posts [107 times] and it is used as a collective word to unite people of the same *national feeling*. Therefore, according to Bernays theory (1928), it is a term used with a

propagandistic purpose because of the context: "*propaganda sees the individual not only as a cell in the social organism but as a cell organized into the social unit"* (Bernays, 1928, p. 27).

The second context, in which the word "Romania" is used in, is where USR presents the idea of a contrast between two countries: on one hand, a Romania situated in a difficult *political crisis*, because of the way it was governed by PSD, and the concept of a "Romania" of honest and just people. USR spoke about the change of image of Romania, starting from the inside of the Government with the full implication of the people. From this point on, they push on with the notion that clearing the internal image will eventually bring the cleansing of the nation in the perception of the European Union.

Bringing *culture* in the discussion, USR express their wishes about integrating the Romanian society in the *European* community. The use of the word *Europe/-ean* [38] next to a list of objectives helps build the concept of a *European standard* that the country should aim to reach. In the context of "becoming European", they present their view on how PSD is trying to maintain, through evil schemes, power in the country which will drive Romania away from becoming a well-respected society in the European community.

The second most tapped *category* in the coding framework was *social practices*. Being in preparation for the European Parliament Elections that took place at the end of May 2019, the Save Romania Union included in their Facebook posts calls for action against the actual power by participating in the *elections* [38] and expressing their choices to bring change to the country though *vote* [43]. *Social practices* are presented in the posts as tools for action towards improving the *political* [27] class. In the fight against *evil*, the citizens get to become the main heroes to "eradicate it" by proving their love for the country with effort, resolution and action.

Voting [43] is the most suggested action by USR for the people to take in order to make the change that every concerned citizen wants. On this matter, the posts present *voting* as an act that everyone can perform. They remind the people of the laws voted in the Parliament that were considered not for the benefit of the people, while the people could not do anything about it. These elections give the chance back to the people to help the right party to get into power and fix everything that's broken with the system. In most of the presented cases in the posts, *voting* is placed as an alternative to *stealing*, the act which is associated with the Social-Democrat Party. Even though

USR argues, in a post, for the fact that using the word "vote" in their messages is not considered propaganda according to the law, the use of the word in the chosen context can be considered as such.

The word "*elections*" [38] was utilized in the spirit of a dual perspective. On one hand, USR pleaded their case against the intent of the ruling party to "sabotage" the elections through their actions on many occasions. On the other hand, the posts portrayed the *elections* as being a sacred part of the *social practices'* repertoire. USR built their political image through the use of specific words, such as "voting" and "elections", in contexts regarding the change of the ruling elite, while contributing to the image of PSD as being "undemocratic".

As part of the *social practices,* the concept of "politics" [27] is being illustrated in the Facebook posts. USR portrays it from the perspective of the citizen, as a notion that people do not like it because of the gained notoriety in history, but they also underline its polarity: "politics is negative or positive depending on who makes it". In this case, the examples go back to the *dichotomy* with the examples presented with some of the names from the Social-Democrat Party as having questionable integrity, while the politicians from the Save Romania Union have no trouble with the law. The image of the country is built on the image of the ruling party, therefore, the participation of its citizen to political life, and contribution through *voting* during *elections* is imperative.

Under the *sense of national identity* theme, I have discovered a portrayal of the *communal feeling*, which has a structure formed in three dimensions (x, y, z). The first dimension represents the place where everybody was born and lives in, the *country/nation* [10], a space where all citizens should stay united and work to building of a better world, and not let money-hungry politicians, like the ones from PSD, to keep everything for themselves and let the people become poorer. As they put it "*a country is as poor as its people's involvement*".

The second dimension (y), represents the people that are living outside the country's boarders: *diaspora* [4]. USR are trying to get the people living outside of Romania involved in the elections, with the plan that due to a potential growth of the economic system in the country, they might return and plant new family and business roots. Which leads to implications on the third dimension (depth), an idea that urges people to think about how to benefit to future generations of children

wanting to stay and not migrate like the actual case. On this note, the call on dealing with the current state of things in order to change society for the better.

The "*self-image as a political protagonist*" theme incorporates the images of the two protagonists constructed by the USR's Facebook posts. From this point on, it can be observed that there is a clear separation between the two political blocs, on the extremities of the political stage, the differences being based on each one's quality of members, purposes and results. These characteristics will be debated further on into the analysis.

The Save Romania Union's posts illustrate the traits of their candidates, with a crossover with the characteristics of their opposition. In order to bring the best out of being part of the European Parliament, they urge people to vote the candidates with *experience* [6] on trading with European parties and not political puppets that will only make an appearance. The voters should take into consideration the party's *values*, before making their choice. The most showcased *value* by USR is "*good*". Again, this is a reminder of the traditional battle between good and evil. They present *good* [13] as being their plan of virtue and purpose of their actions. Therefore, they appeal to the voters that want the *good* to prevail they should do the right thing and vote for the USR's candidates. Whenever we are talking about achieving a goal, it is necessary to measure the *strength* that we could use for it. In this case, the Save Romania Union have outlined their *strength* [9] around the people's willingness to vote, also through their "sacred" mission of protecting the *rule of law*.

Completing the *self-image* theme, I have selected *call to action* as part of the representative categories. The actions that USR focuses on is *fighting* [5] and *helping* [2] regarding the support of the *rule of law* and the acts against *corruption*. They characterize it as a duty for all to fulfill.

As an extension of their personal values and purposes, the Save Romania Union remind the people that the ruling party is a reflection of the people based on their character and choices. Therefore, the best of their choices should be electing *fair* [8] and *competent* [7] candidates. The country's image in the European Parliament will be established on the image's quality of the representatives. They are urging all the *fair* voters to stand together and elect *fair* representatives. Furthermore, they are suggesting that only through *decency* [2]*,* the *welfare* [3] of the nation can thrive. All these *values* are part of their *view over their fellow citizens* which is important because it may be

considered "a way to try and convince the people that their view is better than their opponent's" (Bernays, 1928, p. 31).

On a different level, USR's posts managed to build a portrayal of the two political blocs by bringing into a dispute two types of authorities that contrast each other in nature, which in this case it also brings into focus two separate characteristics of political culture: *perspective on government* and *knowledge about the political process*. I will present them separately, even though, because of the main *dichotomy* of *good vs. evil*, their value is boosted when using them in contrast, inside the same construct. The main reason for the separation choice is that I am looking to display the analysis in an easier form for identifying possible characteristics of a political culture.

In the *perspective on government* theme, I identified characteristics regarding the ruling party, which pushes the idea that, in their posts, USR considers the current government as being a projection of the ruling party and its members, starting with its leader *Dragnea* [28].

Dragnea is portrayed as the starting point for the Social-Democrat Party's bad blood. All of the bad associations with the ruling party are seen as consequences and extensions of the PSD's leader and members. For that reason, the outline of the Save Romania Party's strategy is based on mobilizing the people to go and vote for change. Furthermore, the acts and decisions committed against the interest of the nation were under the initiative of the ruling party and its leader.

The second most used code in this category is "*criminal*" [22]. On this note, USR's posts claim that many of the operations that took place in the government under PSD's rule were *criminal* acts, for which the USR hopes that one day, the guilty will be held accountable for. On the other hand, the Save Romania Union started a campaign called "No criminals in public office", which began with an act of collection of signatures from registered voters and eventually would push on for a national referendum. In their posts, USR talks about the quality of the people that are members of the Social-Democrat Party, giving examples of those who are being charged in relation to different cases. On this subject, they launch accusations regarding the fact that they could use their position in government to influence the way their being treated under the letter of the law, such as granting themselves *immunity* [2].

The next subject on the matter of how would USR see the Government functioning properly is the eradication of *thievery* [21]. In their posts, the Save Romania Union has presented numerous cases

where the use of the word "thievery" is central. First item to be mentioned is their national campaign called "Without thievery, we can progress". In this situation they are blaming the government for the lack of progress of the country's status, especially on the European stage. The fault is hindered behind the ruling party's acts of thievery. Therefore, they are giving examples of how the elimination of *thievery* can help build and renovate schools, modernize the country's infrastructure such as transportation and healthcare.

Corruption [13] is another important affair that is disputed in the Facebook posts. This fraudulent act has put a big dark mark on the country's name, in front of the European Union. The Save Romania Union presents its project for stopping corruption, starting from drafting a solid word of law, under European standards. On the other hand, USR is pointing out the fraudulent deeds accomplished by the members of the ruling party, PSD. Furthermore, in many cases, the dishonest operations inside the ruling party's administrative organization have transcended into the government, and the only way to stop this is to vote against the ruling party.

The proof of the country being administered under the *rule of man* is number of alleged *abuse* [12] of power from the ruling party, in matters of justice and state authority. The Save Romania Union presented their public accusations that the ruling party is trying, unsuccessfully, to pull strings in order to keep them out of the European Parliament Elections. But, after two years of *abuse* and protests, the citizens have to opportunity to change through vote, the way the country is being run.

Going back to the issues regarding *criminal* offenses, USR is pointing out that due to the last laws in justice, thousands of *felons* [8] were released, which they considered a simple move to only keep a number of influential members of the party out of prison. As long as they "helped" lawbreakers to receive "get out of jail free" cards, they will, presumably, do whatever is in their power to *steal* [9] the vote from honest and decent citizens. Therefore, PSD is trying win the elections through the use of *undemocratic* [6] means.

When discussing the *perspective on government* theme, the USR's posts focus more on the actual government, and how the ruling party is *ignoring* [2] the country's issues, by *abusing* power and adopt laws that contribute only to their benefit, while *manipulating* [1] the truth and using *undemocratic* measures to keep the people in check. In this case, I have chosen to classify these codes under the category: *rule of man*.

Moreover on the *perspective on government,* it is imperative also to discuss the posts regarding the characterization of the *output* department. In their Facebook posts, the Save Romania Union marked PSD's acts while being in power for more than 15 years as a waste of time and tax-payers money, because of their lack of positive accomplishments regarding the status of the country. Due to their contribution with *nothing* [7] towards the benefit of the country, they launched an online campaign called "#NimicEstiTu" (in translation, "you are nothing"). In terms of *output*, the ruling party has done *nothing* for the country after gaining the majority in the government. Also, USR stated that instead of issuing GEOs (Government Emergency Ordinance) [3] that serve their political agenda, they should have used their power to do good not *evil* [2] to the Romanian democracy.

In contrast with *the rule of man* instated in the actual government, the Save Romania Union presented a few ideas where they put focus on what should be the highest authority in the country, *the rule of law*. Therefore, I have organized this category of codes under the theme: *knowledge about the political process.* This is where USR makes the transition from where the actual government is situated on the scale of *good* vs. *evil*, to where their campaign plan aims towards and towards the party's intention of supporting the letter of law.

In this context, the posts describe *voting* [43] as being the number one solution to changing the quality of the administration and the direction the country is heading right now, cause of the ruling party. According to the democratic law, voting is the most sacred of expressions regarding the country's reign. *Voting* in these elections for the right candidates is the opportunity for the citizens to exercise their *right* [9] to choose what is best for them, for now and for their future.

Based on their posts, the focus of their campaign is on gaining more influence in the *European Parliament* [32], with the help of the people that wish their country to strive and escape out of the political crisis created by the ruling party. Thus, their main motto for the European *Parliament* Elections is to "change the image of the Romanian political society". To bring back the contrast between USR and PSD, the Facebook posts share some light over the candidates chosen by the ruling party to run for the European Parliament. Some of the names on PSD's list had encounters with the *law* [6], and they were remanded under the accusation of fraud and abuse of power. On this matter, USR urges people to vote for the right people to represent them in the European Parliament.

Moving on to their plans for the Election Day, the Save Romania Union has managed to introduce a *referendum* [25], where people will get to decide if the government will still be able to issue GEOs overnight, without the consent of the people's representatives, or not. They named this act "*a referendum for justice*", and they endorsed it by reminding voters of the situation created in 2017, with the GEO that freed criminals by changing the limit of the lesion that decides when a lawbreaker is considered a felon. USR proclaimed in their posts that these GEOs are a dangerous weapon in the hands of a party "*full of criminals*" that have a lot to lose before the law.

Presenting a solution to the problems that started from inside the government and perpetuated in the Romanian society, is the main strategy for the Save Romania Union to disclose their intentions, while portraying in details, their perspective of the way the ruling party have been performing for the past 30 years. These findings show how Cartocci's political culture model and Bernays' propaganda theory can help a political party build their image in front of their electorate. The next step is to analyze how the electorate has received this model of political culture.

4.3 The world seen through the eyes of the electorate

In the commentary section, it cannot be pointed out towards the elements of a single reality due to the people with different opinions that interact to what the previous posts have presented for the electorate. Therefore, I have identified users coming with three different perspectives when expressing their view. Firstly, we have the people that expressed their support for the Save Romania Union, followed by the users that reacted to the posts and challenged them, while the third perspective is being pushed by the users that focus more on generic ideas of how politics should work for the benefit of the people and not on who should win the elections. In order to keep on track with the research design and eventually reach the answering of the problem formulation, I will guide this part of the analysis using the framework built by the previous examination in 4.2. Due to the existence of the three perspectives, I will try and illustrate the way these codes have been used, in my attempt to depict the groups interact to one another.

Taking codes into account, by far the most commonly used codes were regarding the *vote* [556] and the protagonists *USR* [440] and *PSD* [420]. Thus, I will start with the portrayal of the *social practices* category. In the comments, *voting* is being depicted unanimously as the most "sacred" of the democratic practices because it represents the best expression of free will regarding political

participation. From this point on, the contexts in which this code is being used changes its focus depending on who are the users that express their understanding of it.

One of the groups are pushing for the idea that *voting* is the right action to support the democratic values and try and give a chance to a young party that was presented as having no connection to the old communist system. Going with this party which presented their strategy as being pro-European will shut down the "mob-action" that has been taking place for the past 30 years. Based on the fact that the political situation in Romania is in a crisis and that the Save Romania Union are a new party with "young" members, the users from this group declared that they will vote for them, for the simple fact that *change* is needed.

On the other hand, there are users that attribute USR's Facebook posts as being *propagandistic* [18], so that people would get *manipulated* [34] into voting for a new party, while the traditional side votes for the party that has always been on this stage for 30 years and knows what has to be done.

The third group stress about the difficult choice people have to make in order to choose the right candidates. Even so, the people should think about the future of their children before making that decision, and should make it based on the emotions created by the propagandistic messages coming from both parties.

In the *social practices* category, people discussed the impact of *politics* [113] in, what they call, the national perspective. *Politics* is being viewed as a negative part of the Romanian society, because of the situation that Romania is now situated regarding their status on the international stage, but also on the quality of its performance during the past 30 years. As a general view, the users agree on the idea that *politics* is only where the personal interests of some powerful people lay.

The use of the code "*elections*" [55] has brought out a different context from the one presented in the Facebook posts, such as the fact that because these elections are for determining who takes up places in the European Parliament, which will not have much an effect because of the country's position in the "EU's importance ladder". Thus, the users consider that the elections that will truly matter are the presidential ones in 2020.

From the category of *social practices,* I will continue on the *cultural* level, which due to the difference in the group perspectives will show that there will be outlined two opposing ideologies. The interaction between these two opposing ideologies is central to the discussion around the cultures that are being laid out. Firstly, we have a debate between the two concepts: *Romanian* [258] and *European* [112]. One of the groups are reacting to USR's of "a European country at European standards" posts with reluctance. They consider that Romania will never be respected enough by the rest of the European powers, which implies that Romania should stick to its traditional and conservative ways if they want to keep their resources and values inside the country's borders.

On the other hand, the other group present themselves as being progressive, and wish that the new political parties, such as the Save Romania Union, should look for ways to help their country develop under the European standards. Within this framework, people are spilt in views by whether they should accept the way society is constructed in Western Europe and apply it to the Romanian society, or keep their own traditional culture and just accept changes in the economical division.

On the term of "*patriotic*" [22], the debate goes on to a conflicting level, where users with different views of what it stands for lash out at the supporters from the other end. Firstly, some of the electorate consider that being *patriotic* means supporting traditional values and try choosing and conserving the goods that their country gives, over the European ones. While the opposing group argues for the fact that times are changing, and being patriotic means for the people to accept that what is best for them might also come from outside the borders, therefore embrace the Western European solutions.

The *sense of national identity* theme incorporates *culture* and *social practices* as its categories, but also the *community feeling*. In order to express their community feeling, the users used words such as "*country*" or "*nation*" [203]. The meaning that the users attribute to this term is the patriotic feeling of belonging to a common place. They portray their country as a holy place that they inherited, but the internal political disarray has turned the people against each other.

The users acknowledged that the future of the *country* will be decided in the next elections, which will eventually decide the future of the *children's* [61] quality of life. The *children* become in their view the reason why voters should take better care of their country and pay more attention to whom

they vote for. Furthermore, they present the case where most of their children left the country to find work and live more decent lives. From this point, there is a switch of focus towards the *young people* [54], which refers to the ones responsible for making choices when voting for candidates. Some users say that young people should be more attentive to the matters that involve their country, while others say that they shouldn't leave themselves easily manipulated by the new political parties that take advantage of them through the use of modern technologies.

The electorate that took part in these conversations have adopted the use of the word "*nephews*" [38] in the context as how future generations will take over the society they live in. In most cases, it was a word use with propagandistic purposes, as a term of appellation in the context "you and your nephews", followed by the actual message that was intended.

The main political protagonists of these comments are *USR* [440] and *PSD* [420]. Their image is being built and debated through the users' perception. It is easily observable that in their views, this clash of parties is representative of the classical clash between *good* and *evil*. Their way of seeing the world around them is either this side or the other, no middle ground. Most of the users have expressed their choice of who will they support, but not without motivating their decisions. There are two types of motivation: pro for their preferred party and against the party they dislike. From both sides, the supporters have expressed their antipathy towards the party and their followers from the opposition. Each and one of them pointed their fingers towards their opposition as being the cause of disarray (in the case of PSD) or disunion (in the case of USR).

Because of the way the protagonists are depicted by their supporters in the selected comments, I decided to include them in the expression of the "*self-image as a political participant*" theme.

When searching for the *values* found in the Facebook posts, it stood out the fact that there was no mention of the word "*good*" in the context of "doing good in society" compared to the posts [13]. The word "*help* [30]" was remarked in most of the comments inside a traditional saying from the Romanian culture "may God help us". This example can be considered a bit of proof of the fact that social scientists consider the Romanian culture as having religious characteristics.

In the "*View over fellow citizens*" department, the interaction takes lead when trying to identify the responses to the posted messages, of Facebook users. This is where the supporters of the two opposing political blocs have a dispute over their beliefs without showing any tolerance to their

companions. The analysis over the interaction between people with different beliefs also brings light over the type of values they possess for themselves, also it shows the nature of the political parties they support.

In the coding framework I have added the ^ sign to some of the codes in order to indicate which of them where used by both sides as a means to getting their message across.

The most used code was "*stupid*" [84], a term addressed mainly towards people that were considered blind in the situation where they had to face the reality presented by the Save Romania Union's posts. In contrast, the people supporting the other side were indicating the fact that the posts are simply propagandistic messages, and that whoever takes them as more than that are "*stupid*". A lot of the reactions to this type of message were of negative energy, with hostility and lack of tolerance.

Interesting to observe was the fact that, even though, the Facebook posts contained accusations to the expense of the ruling party, there was no use of the word "*liar/lies*" in regard to that. But, there were reactions of that kind towards the supporters of the Social-Democrat Party that commented on those accusations. Alongside with the word "*liar*" [76], there was an additional term used in order to characterize the quality of the users backing PSD namely "*postac - paid supporter*" [41]. These titles were used to underline the low credibility that the Social-Democrat Party has in front of the people that decided to vote for USR.

The word "*thieving*" [71] was used to portray the way the users see the members of the Social-Democrat party regarding their leadership in the Government. From that point, they interpreted the actions and identity of the PSD candidates for the European Parliament Elections and of their leader, *Dragnea* [49]. The supporters of USR tried to relate to the activities that put the country's image on the international stage, and those acts were mainly related to *thievery*.

Further on, the online conflict went on a more ideological level. The Social-Democrat supporters reacted to the posts about "European standards" with the accusation of *treason*. They considered the members of the Save Romania Union alongside with their supporters as being *traitors* for allegedly selling the resources of the country to the European Union. In response, the USR's defenders accused them for treason as well but with the motivation that, the *thievery* performed by

the PSD for filling their personal pockets is the more real thing and more abominable than making deals with the European Union to save a fallen economy.

Because of the known history of the Social-Democrat Party after the 1989 revolution, when a lot of former Communist Party's members formed a new party with a democratic ideology (PDSR) (Turcanu, 2007, p. 372), the supporters of the nowadays Save Romania Union call the PSD' followers as being *communists* [50] or affiliates of the former *state militia* [47]. This brings the circle of events to a close, with the reaction of the Social-Democrat defenders by calling them anti-*patriotic* and *traitors*.

Under the *perspective on government* theme, it appears to be a general acknowledgement about the ways the government has operated during the past 30 years. The people that commented on the Facebook posts consider that the *power* [46] has *corrupted* [17] the politicians that gained it and made them *steal* [63] "everything" from the people. They considered all past governments to have taken advantage of their voters and used their influence only to "fill their pockets with tax payers' money". The *rule of man* category is highly represented by specific codes to express the users' perspective upon the governments' past deeds.

The comments indicate that when the users became more specific about who is to blame from the current government, they looked towards ruling party' leader and his followers. The information regarding the questionable character of the PSD's members have made the users discuss the importance of not having problems with the law, while most of them have been charged in different cases for *abuse* [11] or for *felonies* [18]. They all supported the initiative launched by USR called "No criminals in public office".

In matters of the *Government output* the code "*nothing*" [128] stands out and shows that the people's perspective about what the government's activities represent in the current form is the same as the one presented by the Facebook posts. The users stated unanimously that the government under the current ruling party has *achieved nothing* [9] for the good of the people, but only good for themselves.

When testing people's *knowledge about the political process*, the first thing observed in the comments was the importance of *voting* [556]. Voting is considered the most important means of democratic expression. The users talk about the *right* [39] to *vote* as being "sacred" in a society

that followed after 40 years of communist rule. As a response to the *Rule of man* exercised by the government's output, the people reacted to the posts by saying that nobody should be above the *law* [36], and if current members of the government have broken it, they should be held accountable.

The debate about the importance of these elections took place in the context of what might this membership in the European Parliament benefit their country. In this case, followers of the Save Romania Union argued for the experience of their candidates at the European level, while the Social-Democrat supporters accused their opponents of being "puppets dancing in someone else's theater" with no benefit for the country they came from.

The idea of the *referendum* [55] was received with reluctance by the social media users. Even though they thought about it as being a good idea, they did not believe in the possibility to be taken into account, because the last referendum, which was about limiting the number of members of the Romanian Parliament, still hasn't been put into use.

The *rule of law* is a category that both sides appear to agree upon, with exception to whom the users believe is better fit to *protect* [4] it and to use it in a more ethical way. Last but not least, their concerns about *justice* [11] has been a subject discussed with a particular focus on the insurance that it will stay independent, and the people who gain power after future elections, will keep it that way.

4.4 Discussions about the findings

In this part of the analysis I'm aiming to solve the problem formulation by building a parallel between the two discovered worlds, the reality presented by the Save Romania Union's Facebook posts and the world outlined by the interaction of users in the comments section.

The reality portrayed by the USR's Facebook posts is centered on the competition between two political blocs, the Save Romania Union and the Social-Democrat Party. USR's approach to connect with the people was to design this competition as a traditional conflict of *good* vs. *evil*.

Based on that strategy, the Save Romania Union had to convince the online participants why this clash is important to take place, and why making the right choice about who to get more seats in the European Parliament is imperative for the country's successful breakout from the presumed

crisis situation. On this matter, the responses to these ideas were positive on the concept of a battle between *good* and *evil*. Though, the reactions were for and against to which party represents what side, and who has a better claim for the places in the European Parliament. Important to highlight is that the two worlds are different as the way they've been created. The identification of a political culture in the first one has its foundation on the way the Save Romania Union wished to portray it in a unidirectional way, while its correspondent is the result of the interaction between both sides' supporters.

The sense of national feeling is a dominant theme in this analysis and it is being strongly expressed in both realities. USR refers to the country as being stuck in the old ways because of the ruling party that holds back a possible progression. Therefore, it is time that the country should move closer to the European standards and get elected leaders that will lead it into that direction. Their purpose is to integrate the country culturally and regarding all its standards in multicultural environment of the European Union alongside with their high living standards. There was a spilt reaction to these statements, where myself, as a researcher could easily identify and characterize not just a simple clash between two opposing parties, but a clash of two different ideologies or in this case, two political cultures. The Social-Democrat supporters presented their ideas having a more conservative nuance, by considering the Europeans as being puppet masters that take advantage of their country's economic situation and take their resources in exchange for "petty cash". On the other side, the Save Romania Union's followers have introduced themselves as being more progressive, and ecstatic about working towards becoming part of a possible future European federation. By giving a little more control to the European leadership, the corruption inside the country would go down, and the government will be more protected against the formation of "old system" type influential groups, like the one ruling nowadays. Thus, the concept of being a "patriot" is a fluid concept depending on which side I am listening too. The only general accepted belief about being a patriot is that, as a citizen, you wish the best to your country and act on it.

Social practices are a subject where both realities coincided in meanings, where voting is the best way to celebrate the fact that the people are living in a democracy (after 40 year of communist rule), and that this act is the only way to decide for the best future. The Facebook posts focus on the fact that change is needed in rule, and the only way to evolve in country status is to vote for good *politicians* that know what is the best direction the country should go towards. While the

comments are simply presenting a debate about how *voting* is being used a subject through which propagandistic messages are being transmitted by both parties.

The term *country* is being used in both realities as a collective noun with the purpose of bringing people together and fight united for a better world where their future generations would love to live in, and not migrate outside the country's borders.

Describing the *self-image as a political participant*, USR's posts talk about the voters as being the most important part of the changes needed to take place in the government. Thus, they address the readers to vote for the more *experienced* and *capable* people of making a change, such as the USR's candidates. Furthermore, they use "*good*" as a virtue that any politician should embrace and that eventually, their results would follow. The users present their perspectives over the protagonists, by expressing different types of emotions. The ones that are easy to identify are the ones that show their love and support for one of the political blocs, while the other type is where they show their antipathy and loathing towards the opposing party. Both are important rationalized types of emotions that motivated users to comments on these posts.

Taking the comparison to the *view over fellow citizens* theme I identified a more aggressive stance that take place in both realities. *Values* such as *fairness* and *competency* took the floor in the Facebook posts, as being related to the Save Romania Union's candidates, also to all voters that elect them, saying that their representatives are purely an extension of their supporters. In contrast, the posts bring both types of responses, as if they were perceived as a challenge.

The *interaction* category stands out when researching the responses to the posts about citizen *values*. It is easy to depict the formation of two opposite camps that question these values, which turns simple debates in a massive battle of accusations. These accusations functioned like a domino effect between the two sides. On one side, the USR's followers address their opponents as being part of the old *communist* regime, members of *state militia* due to the *propagandistic ideas* they chose to accept as their own beliefs. Furthermore, they said that they will vote for change, so that *lies* about progress stop, and the *thieving* from the ruling party would get punished in front of law. The Social-Democrat supporters take the traditionalist approach and accuse the opposition of being *ignorant* of their past, and therefore, traitors for supporting external intervention in the country's

affairs. The European Union should not have all the sayings about what should be done, because that is how they will take advantage, like any imperialist power.

The fact that the Save Romania Union is a newly formed party looking to make their mark in history and, based on their posts, "change the image of Romanian politics", has made them form their strategy more focused on indicating what they think it's wrong, and how it should be done right. Thus, the next two themes can be considered as a complete portrayal of the created conflict between the two opposing political blocs. That is why, *the perspective on government* and the *knowledge about the political process* reach at first glance on the debate between their categories: *rule of man* vs. *rule of law*.

The Facebook posts built an image of the current government as being a fully made product of the Social-Democrat Party. Their results equal "nothing" in their perspective and they're a consequence of *corruption* and *thieving* done on a large scale. Their *criminal* records under the accusation of *abuse* and *corruption* should be a powerful enough reason for the people to react and vote for a "decent" party in order to cleanse the image of the Romanian politics on the international stage. The responses were interestingly homogenous, focused on the idea that all past governments had problems with the law eventually, by having members form the old regime.

On the other hand, the *rule of law* was presented in the Facebook posts, as an ideal to be fought for. The Save Romania Union has presented their view over how important *law* is, in order to have growth as a society. Their main objective was to mobilize people to go to vote for candidates that want a change towards a European ideal. The only way to get there is to unite against the common *evil* that took over the government. Their secondary objective was to organize a *referendum* in *justice* in order to limit the power of the government when trying to impose some new laws (GEOs). The responses in this category were homogenous as well "nobody should be above the law", but the way that law should be written or protected, has split the users by bringing into focus each ones' allegiance for the opposing political blocs. The traditionalist Social-Democrat supporters stressed about outside powers interfering in the internal affairs as being worse than having their own politicians abuse power for their own personal agendas. While on the other side, USR's followers argued for the importance of moving on and giving in to more experienced leaders that managed to bring their countries at a higher standard (which hopefully will happen as well in the case of their own).

The Facebook posts have shown how the Save Romania Union presented their campaign for the elections, while showing the way they see the world, and what their purpose is in that world. The users that read those posts have interacted with the issuer of the political messages, but most of all, they interacted with people that see the world through almost a totally different perspective. The clash of viewpoints have helped the researcher to unveil the users' deep beliefs.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to identify how a three year old party (USR) has managed to becoming number three in polls after two of the more established and experienced parties, while the leading party from two years back (PSD) to plunge by 23%. With the new trend in organizing political campaigns on social media, I decided to focus on Save Romania Union's Facebook campaign and try to answer the research question.

How did the use of Social Media increase the Romanian people's political participation before the 2019 European Parliament Elections?

- *How did the Save Romania Union build their base of supporters in preparation for the 2019 European Parliament Elections?*
- *How did the electorate present their political culture from the way they perceive the two political opposing blocs (USR & PSD), in preparation for the 2019 European Parliament Elections?*

The analysis was guided by the coding framework, which had as its main themes: *sense of national identity, self-image as a political participant, view over fellow citizens, perspective on government, knowledge about the political process.* The choosing of these themes made it possible to integrate the analysis of the data into Cartocci's model of *political culture* and to easily relate to Bernays' *propaganda* theory.

Mainly, the Save Romania Union focused their campaign around a built rivalry with the ruling party, the Social-Democrat party. They appealed to propagandistic methods to portray this encounter as a battle between *good* and *evil*, which the electorate would easily relate to due to its

Christian cultural background. From that point on, they have portrayed their ideology under the outline of a *political culture* of European progress.

The analysis of the comments brought into light not just an acceptance of this political culture but also an actual clash of two different political cultures. I would say that, the act of publishing aggressive posts regarding the identity of the opposing party, has enabled a clash of cultures without any type of tolerance towards other people's different beliefs. Taking into consideration Mazaheri's (2011) study regarding the connection between human emotions and actions, alongside with my research findings, I believe that USR's chosen online strategy to motivate people's action by promoting conflict has shown good results. On that matter, I suggest further studies to take place on the subject of gaining favor from the electorate by promoting cultural conflicts.

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