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DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES IN THE NOVEMBER 2021 BULGARIAN ELECTIONS CAMPAIGN: KEY ACTORS AND AMPLIFIERS

Policy Brief No. 105, November 2021

On November 14, 2021 Bulgaria is voting for president, and, for a third time this year, for parliament. Elections are happening in the midst of a perfect storm of crises: the COVID-19 pandemic is at the height of its fourth wave with deaths at record high in global comparison, political instability and polarization have reached pitch high levels, and skyrocketing energy prices threaten social peace. This renders the country uniquely vulnerable to propaganda and disinformation[1]. The deterioration of media freedom and the lack of any credible public policy responses to disinformation and social media polarization, have exposed voters to a toxic cocktail of local and foreign propaganda ahead of the elections[2]. This rapid reaction assessment, seeks to improve the understanding of the link between the use of disinformation messaging techniques and popular attitudes on key contemporary issues during the November 2021 election campaigns. It conducts a brief overview of the main social media communication patterns of political parties and candidates and tries to reveal possible influence over voting patterns.

KEY POINTS

➢ The deterioration of media freedom and the lack of **credible public policy responses** to disinformation have exposed Bulgarian voters to a toxic cocktail of local and foreign propaganda.

➢ The widespread dissemination of propaganda and disinformation narratives in Bulgaria should be seen in the framework of the increased **societal impact of social media channels** and the competition between democratic and authoritarian regimes.

➢ Mainstream political parties have captured much of the **social media attention** during the current election campaign. Yet smaller **nationalist** political groups have significantly increased their reach.

➢ The most popular narratives in the Bulgarian Facebook space in the weeks before the elections concerned COVID-19, and **the vaccines.**

➢ The most popular disinformation narrative regarding the European Green Deal portrayed it as a **utopian, economically unviable policy** that has led to Europe's current energy crisis.

➢ Civil society, unions and interest groups should sensitize social media discourses as watchdogs and factcheckers but also as drivers of evidence-based public discourse on divisive issues.

1 Center for the Study of Democracy, *Capture Proofing Media in Southeast Europe*, Policy Brief No. 98, March 2021.

2 Vladimirov, M. et al., *Tackling Kremlin's Media Capture in Southeast Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2021.

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The analytical framework includes a sample of public Facebook pages and groups, which have been observed over a three-week period (between 14 October and 8 November, 2021). These include mainstream media outlets and influencers, problematic media outlets often disseminating propaganda and disinformation content, user-driven groups and pages focused on polarizing issues, as well as all pages of the major political parties and the most influential political figures. A special cluster of COVID-related pages has also been analyzed to evaluate how political actors have leveraged different COVID narratives (including conspiracy theories) to improve their popularity among Bulgarian voters. Of the 160 thousand posts made in total by all the 538 tracked public groups and pages during the monitoring period, seven of the ten most overperforming posts were related to COVID—19 and contained disinformation messages[3].

Key disinformation narratives

The digital nature of the election campaigns has increased the public's susceptibility to online disinformation.[4] The assessment zooms in on the prevalence and connections to the pre-election campaign of the following two popular (disinformation) narratives:

- COVID-19 is a hoax or at least exaggerated, meaning that measures to restrict infections are not necessary while vaccines are dangerous and could be more harmful than the disease itself.

- The European Green Deal is bad for Bulgaria, has been the main reason for the energy crisis, and should be abandoned. The narrative continues by suggesting that coal-fired power generation needs to be preserved for as long as possible as to prevent an energy supply crisis, which also means the construction of the Belene nuclear power plant project.

Use of disinformation in the election campaign

General Social Media Trends for Political Parties and Presidential Candidates

Mainstream political parties have captured much of the social media attention during the current election campaign. Yet, political newcomers such as the party, 'We Continue the Change', and nationalist groups including most noticeably, 'Revival', have been showing very strong growth in number of followers and interactions[5]. 'We Continue the Change' saw a follower growth of 57%, which was much higher than the average of 4.25% for all parties, and equated to over 17,200 new followers and 65% of total followers gained by all political party pages in the monitoring period. 'We Continue the Change' also had an average daily interaction rate of 6.5%,

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[3] The assessment employs the CrowdTangle public insights tool to analyze the most prevalent disinformation narratives. The tool tracks public Facebook groups and pages allowing for the easier sorting through a large volume of content for a given period of time. It quantifies the scope of interactions with different posts and the types of reactions to them, thus gauging potential impact and the observed patterns of specific content sharing.

[4] Stefanov, R. et al., *The Kremlin Playbook in Southeast Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2020; Stefanov, R*., Countering Kremlin's Media Influence in Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2021.

[5] The interaction rates of mainstream and fringe parties were compared by combining the data for five smaller parties, on the one hand, and six mainstream parties on the other. The group of fringe parties includes Alternative for Bulgarian Revival (ABV), Ataka, the Bulgarian National Movement (VMRO), Volya Movement and Revival. The group of mainstream parties consists of Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), 'There is Such a People', Democratic Bulgaria, and 'We Continue the Change'.

which was over three times higher than the daily rate of 1.76% for mainstream parties as a whole.[6]

Revival accounted for 95% of the total interactions and 98% of the total new followers garnered by a subgroup of five nationalist and pro-Russian parties in the Bulgarian political space (Revival and Alternative for Bulgarian Revival (ABV), VMRO, Ataka, Volya).

Moreover, at slightly over 1%, its interaction rate was seven times higher than the 0.15% average for the other four parties. In other words, Revival, which has been gaining ground with each new election and was just 1% short of passing the 4% parliamentary threshold in July 2021, is singlehandedly responsible for attracting the vast majority of public attention to fringe, pro-Kremlin political stances in Bulgarian Facebook space relative to similar parties. Revival's follower growth saw a noticeable spike after the government implemented a measure for mandatory COVID-19 certificates for indoor activities on 19 October.[7]

Figure 1: Weighted Average Daily Interaction Rates for Mainstream Parties (14 Oct – 8 Nov)
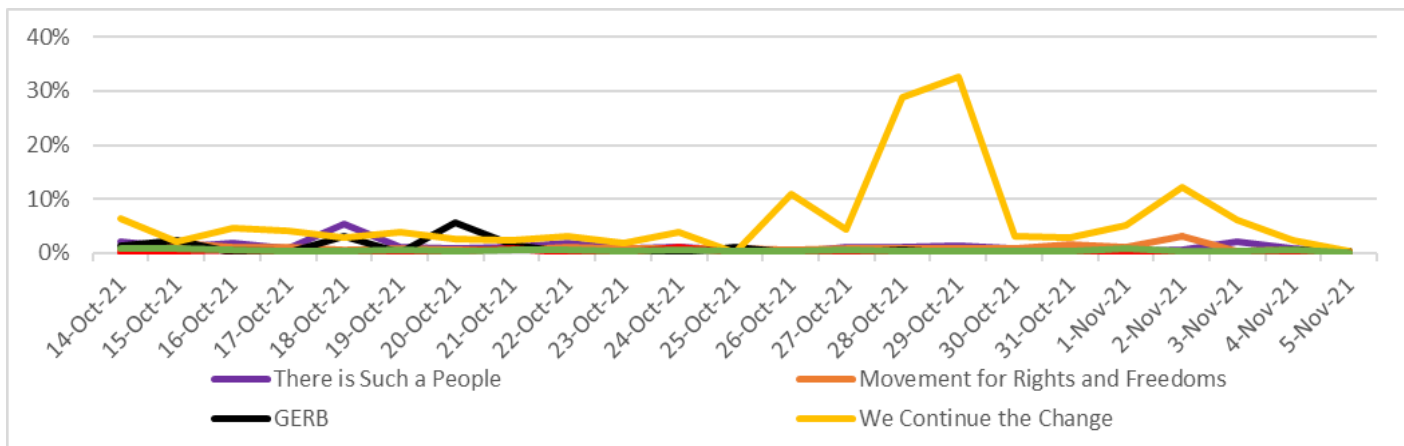
Source: CSD based on CrowdTangle data.

Figure 2: Cumulative Follower Growth in Numbers and Percentages for Presidential Candidates (14 Oct – 8. Nov)
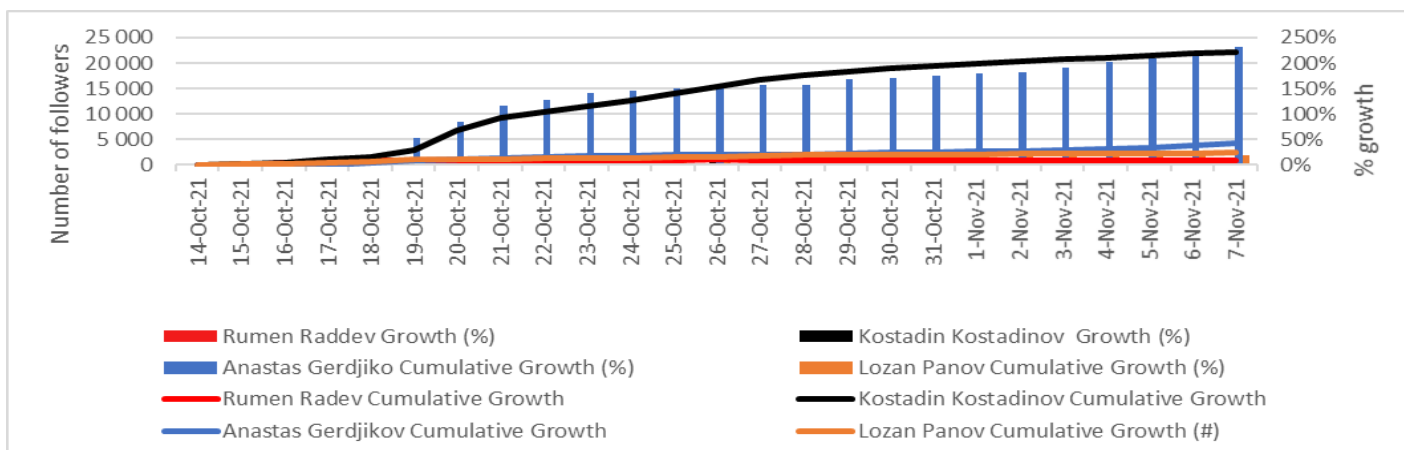
Source: CSD based on CrowdTangle data.

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[6] With Facebook still being the predominant social media in Bulgaria.

[7] In fact, 'We Continue the Change', with its momentous

growth of 57%, was the only party with a higher follower growth than Revival's 7%, with 4% being the average for the 21 parties monitored during the observation period.

Revival's continuing gains are also reflected in the presidential race, with the party nominating its leader, Kostadin Kostadinov. Despite the fact that public opinion polls clearly show he is an underdog compared to mainstream candidates, Kostadinov has the second highest follower count (with 200 thousand followers, behind Rumen Radev's 363 thousand). Strikingly, of the 1.69 million interactions garnered by all posts of presidential candidates during the monitoring period, 60% belonged to Kostadinov.

COVID-19 Disinformation: Main Narratives and Actors

The most popular narratives in the Bulgarian Facebook space in the weeks before the elections were connected to COVID-19, the counter-pandemic measures and/or vaccines. Generally, mainstream media have covered pandemic measures and immunization efforts in a factual manner, even when discussing contentious statements.

Yet, content in problematic pages and groups actively spread disinformation that achieves a higher average interaction rate compared to mainstream outlets, but also with considerably less followers and lower volume of interactions.

Figure 3: Total Interactions and Posts Containing COVID-19 Narratives in 142 COVID-related User-Driven Pages and Groups (14 Oct – 8 Nov)
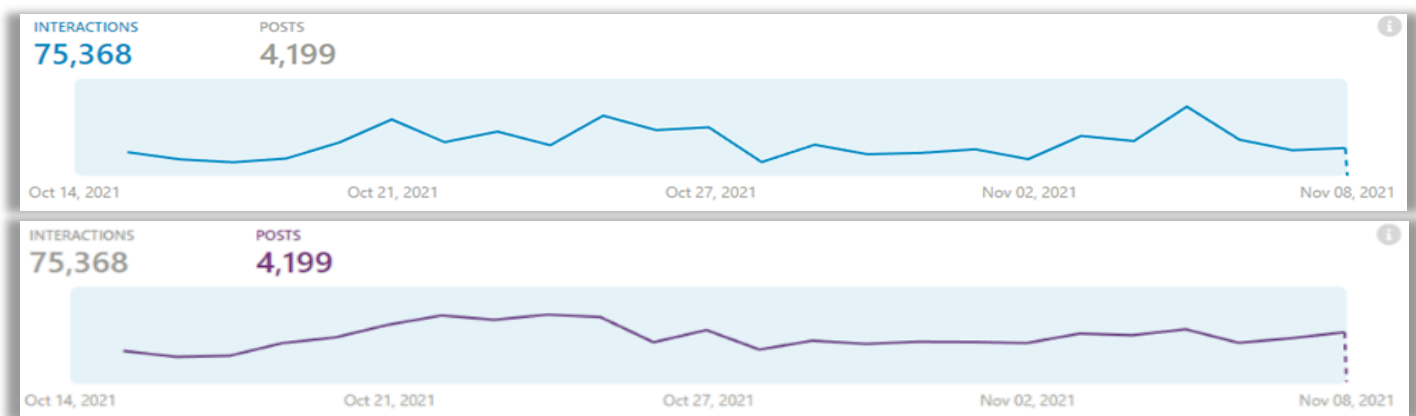
The most popular user-driven narratives revolve around the notions that: COVID-19 certificates are meaningless because vaccinated people get infected and spread the disease as much as unvaccinated people; certificates are a form of dictatorship or fascism; vaccines were developed in a short period and thus untested and unsafe; and the pandemic is a hoax by politicians and large pharmaceutical companies with malign goals.[8]

According to one of the most overperforming posts in this domain, Kiril Petkov from 'We Continue the Change' and the current President Rumen Radev are conspiring with Amazon to build a network of 27 genetic laboratories in Bulgaria, where the DNA of vaccinated Bulgarians will be collected and studied. [9] By far the main source of disinformation in user-driven content is the verified account of Dr. Atanas Mangarov, with six of the top ten most overperforming posts coming from his account. Moreover, there are various fan groups dedicated to systematically amplifying the reach and shares of the disinformation content this one account produces.[10]

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[8] Facebook posts in question are available at: Link; Link; Link; Link.

[9] Facebook post is available at: Link.

[10] Facebook posts are available at: Link; Link.

Figure 4: Total Interactions and Posts Containing COVID-19 Narratives in 142 COVID-related User-Driven Pages and Groups (14 Oct – 8 Nov)
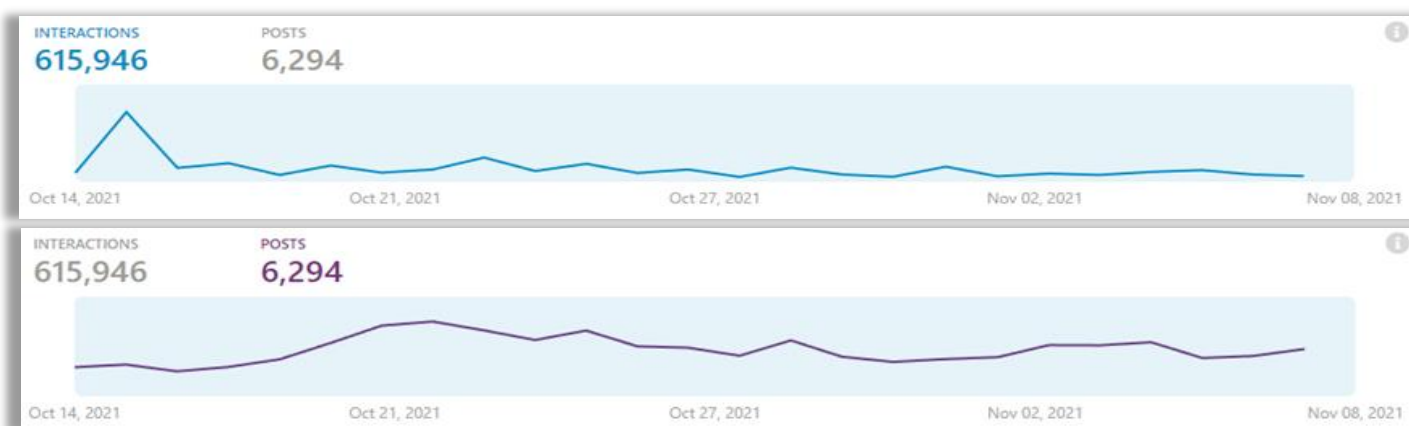
Source: CSD based on CrowdTangle data.

Half of the ten most overperforming posts related to COVID-19 by problematic outlets covered protests and concerns against pandemic measures and vaccines in Western countries, such as in Switzerland, the U.S., Iceland and Italy, in a highly sensationalist manner.[11] These posts clearly served to support protests in Bulgaria following the introduction of mandatory certificates for indoor activities in mid-October 2021 by showcasing the same or similar concerns in Western countries. COVID-related posts by the outlets Bez Logo ('Without a Logo'), Magazine Eight and Pogled Info, which primarily produce their own material, were consistently the most interacted with and with the highest overperformance scores among problematic outlets during the monitoring period.

A number of fringe pages and groups, including pro-Russian fan groups,[12] groups promoting Bulgaria's exit from NATO and the EU,[13] fan groups of Mangarov,[14] religious and ultra-conservative communities,[15] Revival's official groups,[16] and numerous groups and pages dedicated to conspiracy theories regularly reshare and then amplify the content produced by these media channels. The flooding of the social media space with content related to COVID-19 disinformation seeps through into various mainstream and generalist groups and pages.[17] Taken together, the channels that share these outlets' content often have a cumulative following in the hundreds of thousands of users.

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[11] Facebook posts in question are available at: Link; Link; Link; Link.

[12] Facebook posts are available at: Link; Link; Link.

[13] Facebook posts are available at: Link; Link; Link.

[14] Facebook posts are available at: Link; Link.

[15] Facebook post is available at: Link.

[16] Facebook post is available at: Link; Link.

[17] Facebook posts in question available at: Link; Link; Link; Link.

Figure 5: Total Interactions and Posts Containing COVID-19 Narratives in 142 COVID-related User-Driven Pages and Groups (14 Oct – 8 Nov)
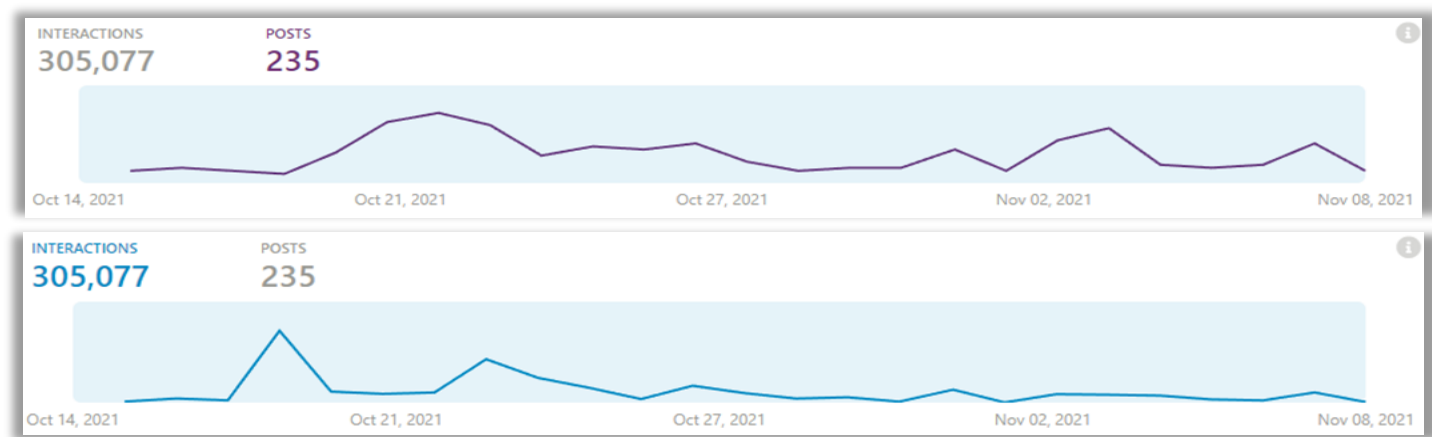
Source: CSD based on CrowdTangle data.

A total of 235 posts on this topic were published by political parties, their leaders, and by presidential candidates. Some of the most popular of these posts often featured popular disinformation narratives. For example, the most overperforming post was by Revival's main page, which quoted a Bulgarian professor as saying that "I won't vaccinate because a vaccine cannot be developed for five months".[18] In general, the leader of BSP Kornelia Ninova and the Revival party were among the most popular, with Ninova claiming that the mandatory certificates must not limit Bulgarians' constitutional freedoms and must be abolished and Revival claiming that certificates are dictated to Bulgaria by the 'Eurocrats'.[19]

European Green Deal: Main Narratives and Actors

The most popular disinformation narratives regarding the European Green Deal portrayed it as a utopian, economically unviable policy that has led to Europe's current energy crisis.

The second most overperforming post shared in the group of problematic media quoted an interview with Rumen Ovcharov, a former Minister of the Economy from the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), according to whom the Green Deal is shortsighted and its 'pseudo-diversification' is actually meant to exclude Russia from the European energy market while facilitating the entry of U.S. shale gas. Highly popular posts also presented the recently held 26th UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow as meaningless and hypocritical, posting videos of Biden seemingly sleeping during the opening speeches, and articles claiming that over 400 private planes were used to travel to the event. Of the ten most overperforming posts by problematic outlets during the monitoring period, six came from known pro-Russian sources: BSP's official TV channel, Pogled Info, and Epicenter. The common theme is opposition to the European Green Deal, often based on misrepresented explanations for the increase of energy prices, and aiming to showcase a strong support for Russian energy projects, such as the nuclear power plant, Belene.[20]

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[18] Facebook post is available at: Link.

[19] Facebook posts in question are available at: Link; Link; Link; Link.

[20] Facebook post is available at: Link.

Figure 7: Total Interactions and Posts Containing European Green Deal Narratives by 155 Problematic Outlets (14 Oct – 8 Nov)
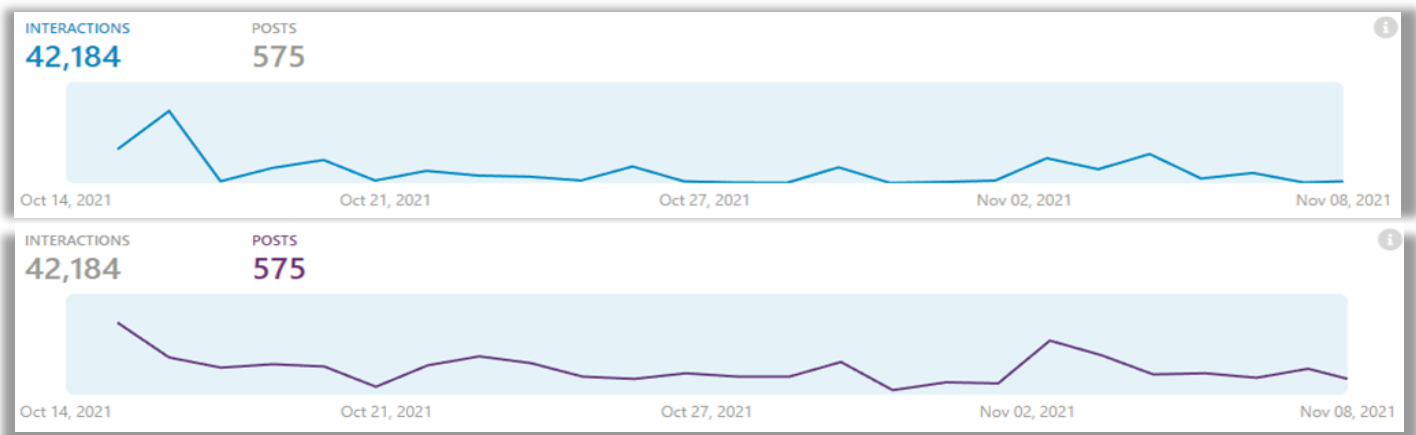
Source: CSD based on CrowdTangle data.

Figure 8: Total Interactions and Posts Containing European Green Deal Narratives by 42 Political Figures, 18 Political Parties and 9 Presidential Candidates Combined (14 Oct – 8 Nov)
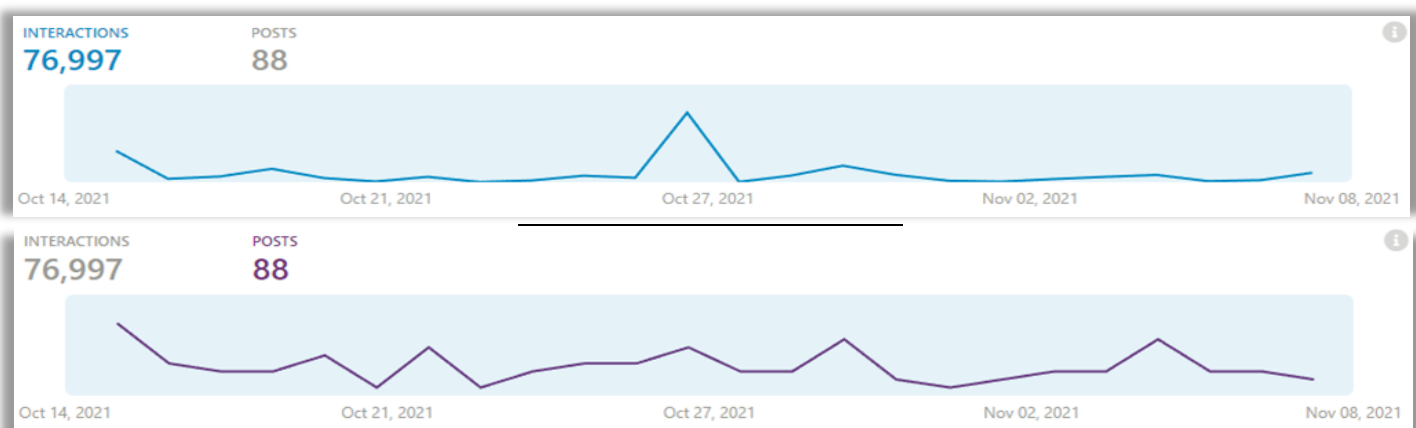
Source: CSD based on CrowdTangle data.

Posts by the pages of the BSP and the nationalist VMRO parties, as well as by their leaders, were by far the most overperforming political content connected to the European Green Deal during the monitoring period. These posts expressed explicit opposition to the energy deal, supported the preservation of lignite power plants and the construction of the Belene nuclear facility. Meanwhile, presidential candidates barely broached the subject on social media, with less than 10 posts referring to the Green Deal or related policies.

These ranged from current President Radev's statements that Bulgaria must both preserve its coal-based production and invest in green technologies, to Kostadinov's claim that the Green Deal will destroy Bulgaria. Support for Russian energy projects also featured heavily in user-driven content in public pages and groups, with the most popular posts explicitly supporting the Belene project and the former South Stream gas pipeline (now TurkStream) referring to quotes by President Radev claiming that Bulgaria cannot meet its energy needs without Russia.[21] Some of these user-driven channels are the same ones that have amplified disinformation narratives related to COVID-19.[22]

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[21] Facebook posts are available at: Link; Link, Link.

[22] For example, see: Link; Link.

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What's Next?

The widespread dissemination of disinformation narratives in Bulgaria should be seen in the framework of the global effects of the increased societal impact of social media channels and the growing competition between democratic and authoritarian regimes. In Bulgaria, the EU-wide debate on the Digital Services Act and the Democracy Action Plan discussing the role of Facebook and other social media on democratic integrity are entirely missing. Nor is the government participating actively in the design of policy solutions and countering the threats emanating from disinformation. Instead, the digital nature of the election campaigns has increased the public's susceptibility to online disinformation.

Political parties and leaders have doubled down on social media as a megaphone of their divisive and oftentimes misleading statements on COVID-19 and other key socio-economic issues. The digital activity of many political leaders has been further amplified by a number of public groups and related pages that re-share content and provide a tribune for political supporters (including troll accounts) to increase the reach of the campaign or to smear political opponents. Media outlets with a partisan spin and/or government backing have further added exposure.

The democratic debate on social media becomes actually a platform for the spread of messages that follow only purely political objectives without providing meaningful solutions to current problems. In this way, traditional media are circumvented or at best are used by politicians to only amplify the same narratives without questioning and constructive criticism or debate.

To counter the expansion of disinformation narratives in the Bulgarian digital space, there is a need to strengthen the role of media and elections regulators, whose capacity should be expanded to cover the more and more hybrid nature of media coverage that includes also social media debates. The continued abuse of social media for political ends can easily exploit social vulnerabilities and divisions to tilt the scales in favor of a particular candidate. Civil society, trade unions and interest groups should play a leading role to sensitize social media discourses not only as watchdogs and factcheckers but also as drivers of evidence-based, democratic public discourse on key issues focusing in particular on subjects that increase polarization, extremism and general societal vulnerability. Bulgaria should also develop financing transparency measures related to political campaigns online that would make all spending by political actors on social media public and easily accessible.