

# Campaigning on Facebook: Posts and online social networking as campaign tools in the 2017 general elections in the Republic of Kosovo



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**ABSTRACT:** The 2017 general elections in Kosovo are the first to be considered for the high use of Facebook by political parties. Kosovo has nearly 1 million Facebook users, and this is one reason that has pushed all political parties, without distinction, to include Facebook in their electoral strategies. The paper analyses the use of Facebook by political parties in the 2017 general election and deals with the adaptation of Kosovar political parties with this new form of political communication and their popularity on Facebook. Data were collected during the campaign using the software R. In the fourth age of political communication, the web 2.0 has changed political campaigns and the flow of information now is more dynamic than in the past. The paper presents the flow of information/messages through Facebook, with politicians connecting directly with citizens, bypassing traditional media. Through a quantitative content analysis of the seven parties' Facebook pages, it is analysed how they used Facebook as a campaigning tool and based on the findings, the mobilisation function was the dominant one.

**KEYWORDS:** campaigning, Facebook, general elections, political communication, social media.



## INTRODUCTION

Social media has also changed political communication by enabling politicians to send the message to audiences without traditional media as transmitting that message. This form of political communication has recently begun to spread also in the Kosovar political elite. There are occasions when political actors choose social media to communicate indirectly or even directly with the public, bypassing traditional media, or the traditional way of sending the message to the public, through press conferences. The paper focuses on analysing the use of Facebook by political parties in the 2017 general election. Political parties have always adapted to new communication

technology to improve their chances in elections, but they are distinguished in the categories of adaptation, from early adopters or laggards (Rogers, 2003). The paper deals with the adaptation of Kosovar political parties with this new form of political communication and their popularity on Facebook. In addition, the type of posting on Facebook is analysed as a campaign tool for information, interactivity or mobilisation. The research focuses on the 2017 general election, the election campaign from 31 May to 9 June, but earlier years have also been included since social media began to be used by the Kosovar political spectrum. Data were collected during the campaign because, in that period, both politicians and voters were more active, making it more appropriate to study political communication in Kosovo in the digital era.

### *Hypotheses*

H1: An opposition party is more likely to early adopt Facebook and more likely to use Facebook actively. Political parties in Kosovo, at different times, have turned their attention to social media, so their network within social media is not the same. Being part of the government or in opposition is considered an important factor for predicting the level of adoption of new technology, such as Facebook. This hypothesis will be measured by analysing the adaptation of the political parties on Facebook, assuming that early adoption will be among opposition parties and analysing their Facebook activity.

H2: Kosovar political parties use Facebook more for announcement than for mobilisation of voters. Types of posts used by political parties determine this hypothesis. There were two main structures of the posts used during the campaign, for mobilisation, and for the announcement. The first one is used to mobilise the voters to vote for the parties. The announcement type of posts has the purpose of keeping the citizens informed about the activities.

## **METHODS**

### *Sample*

The data contains 524 Facebook posts from seven Kosovo political parties during the general election campaign in 2017, from 31 May to 9 June. The data for analysis were collected using software R, a programming language. The categorisation and some parts of analysis are done using software R. Then the data were exported to the Microsoft Excel program, where the final quantitative content analysis of the seven parties' Facebook pages is done.

### *Measurements*

Facebook adaptability has been measured by determining whether political parties use this social network or not. Facebook activity is measured by counting the total

number of political party posts during the election campaign, from day one, 31 May to Election Day, 11 June, bypassing 10 June, the Election Silence Day.

Another feature is the virtual network of political parties on Facebook, which is measured by collecting data about the number of likes of political party pages, taking into account non-active users' profiles as well. The paper analyses the alignment of political parties with Facebook and this is measured using the 'party's age' in this social network.

Coding keywords are used to classify posts on Facebook, which were divided into two categories: mobilisation, and announcement. Where politicians wrote to mobilise voters by calling them to vote for the party, using the party's number in the election or writing the party slogan ended in the category of mobilisation. The announcement category was when parties wrote about their campaign events by informing the public of their schedule today or tomorrow or if in the evening they would be on any TV show.

## **POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

Political communication as a coherent field of study has only been in existence since the 1970s. At that time, the divisions of political communication study within the International Communication Association were created (Ryfe, 2001). There are different definitions for political communication by many scholars and almost all definitions describe it as communication that transmits information between politicians, the media and the public.

In the new *Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, the definition emphasises the power of politics. "Political Communication is defined as making sense of symbolic exchanges about the shared exercise the power and the presentation and interpretation of information, messages or signals with potential consequences for the exercise of shared power" (Jamieson & Kenski, 2017, p. 5). However, Blumler (2016) points out that political communication is not just about the power aspect, but also intertwined with many other elements of politics. Esser and Pfetsch claim that "today, political communication is in many ways characterised by a mix of public and personalised communication, mass media and social media, established and non-established communicators, blurred boundaries between political seriousness and entertainment [...]" (2017, p. 327).

Political communication has changed over time and consistently determinant in its development has been the media. Its evolution does not end there, along with the development of media and technology. Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) divided the evolution of political communication in three ages, and recently, Blumler (2013) proposed a fourth age.

In the first age (around 1850–1960), parties reached the voter in direct contacts and through printed media (Norris, 2000; Gibson & Römmele, 2001). Face-to-face communications and election rallies were some of the main channels of

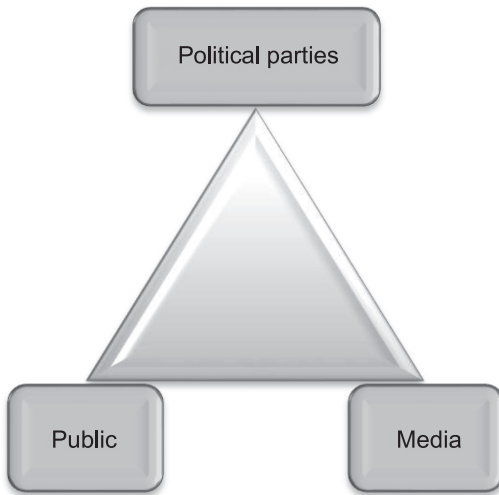


Figure 1. Political communication triangle

Source: Author.

that time, along with the printing of pamphlets or newsletters, which were distributed more easily and cheaper thanks to rail traffic (Norris, 2014). Norris calls this era the classic era of political communication. The second age starts when voters do not receive information directly from the party but use television. At the same time, through television, the parties were now addressing the masses and not just the groups that could have contacts at party gatherings. “In the 1960s limited-channel television became the dominant medium of political communication, while the grip of party loyalty on voters was loosening” (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 212). This transformation of political communication, Norris calls “the decline of direct links between the citizen and the parties and the growth of mediated connections” (Norris et al., 1999, p. 22). In the third age, which began in the 1990s, television has now gone multi-channel. Even during this period, television was the dominant media, but there also appeared a new channel of communication, the internet (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Gibson & Römmele, 2001; Magin et al., 2016). In each age, it is seen that technological developments have always had a great impact. Therefore, Blumler (2013) has recently proposed the fourth age of political communication, linked to the web 2.0 platform and social media. The web 2.0 platform with the innovations it has brought has turned into a new tool for political communication with new channels, such as social networks, microblogs and video platforms (Howard, 2006). “To some degree, the Internet (particularly the Web 2.0) allows parties to bypass the mass media and address the voters directly” (Magin et al., 2016, p. 4). Politicians create social networks and distribute content using Facebook or Twitter and through them can spread news very quickly considering the use of these social media. Vergeer calls this a

personal campaign and says that despite politicians using social media to spread their messages, they still have the attention of traditional media as journalists who are constantly following their activities on social networks (Vergeer et al., 2013), or this kind of personal campaign is not developed by relying on interactions or discussions but by using social media only for informational statutes in order to direct the attention of the public (Merkovity, 2017). Through interaction, a mobilisation of the followers may occur, a process that according to Surowiec and Štětka (2017, p. 5) “is a prerequisite to political participation, and social media have the technological potential to enable this process”.

The political communication process has not been immune to changes in media, because of technological developments. Social media has influenced the change in the flow of political communication between the three actors, politics, media and the audience. Regarding this, politicians have begun to adapt to the innovations that are the result of social media. In the diffusion of innovations theory, Rogers (2003) defines adoption as “full use of an innovation as the best course of action available” and adds that the adopter categories are “the classifications of members of a social system on the basis of innovativeness”. Researcher includes five adopter categories: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards (Rogers, 2003).

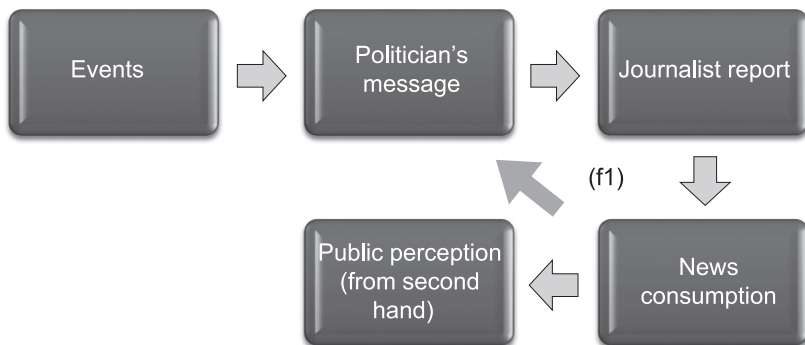


Figure 2. The traditional flow of information/message

Source: Author.

Today, more and more, politicians prefer social media, Facebook, or Twitter to communicate with the public, bypassing traditional media as a bridge between politics and the public. This has caused the flow of information to change. The traditional flow of information is usually one-way, while with the involvement of social media, the flow is much more dynamic and almost interactive. Figure 2 illustrates the traditional flow of information where the first step is the event. After the event, the message of the politician (second step) goes to the public through journalist reporting (third step) and after the news is consumed (fourth step), public perception is created (fifth step). Consuming news is an input to the politician, thus receiving feedback from the public (f1). In the era of traditional media, political parties published their own newspapers to

send the message in line with party interest. Nowadays, this form of message distribution has been developed and the flow of information is via Facebook, which offers the possibility of sending the message while protecting political interests.

Brian McNair (2017, p. 6) says that in today's political communication, Facebook has made it possible to target audiences in a way that was not possible with traditional media. Figure 3 illustrates the flow of information with the inclusion of social media and in this flow, impacts are much more frequent among actors. In this type, the message of the politician arrives directly to the public, without the need for journalist reporting. This enables direct communication of the politician with the public and, consequently, to create a perception of the public, from first-hand information. Meanwhile, there is always the possibility that the message of the politician passes through journalist reporting and has the traditional flow of information.

With this flow of information, there is no longer a classic balancing of distributed information (Krasniqi, 2008) and Facebook is used as a channel through which the message is transmitted. Once the party on Facebook is in the interest of the party's interest, this media can be considered party media and is part of the political profile typology (Kosumi, 2016). This makes it distinct from traditional media aimed at protecting the public's interest.

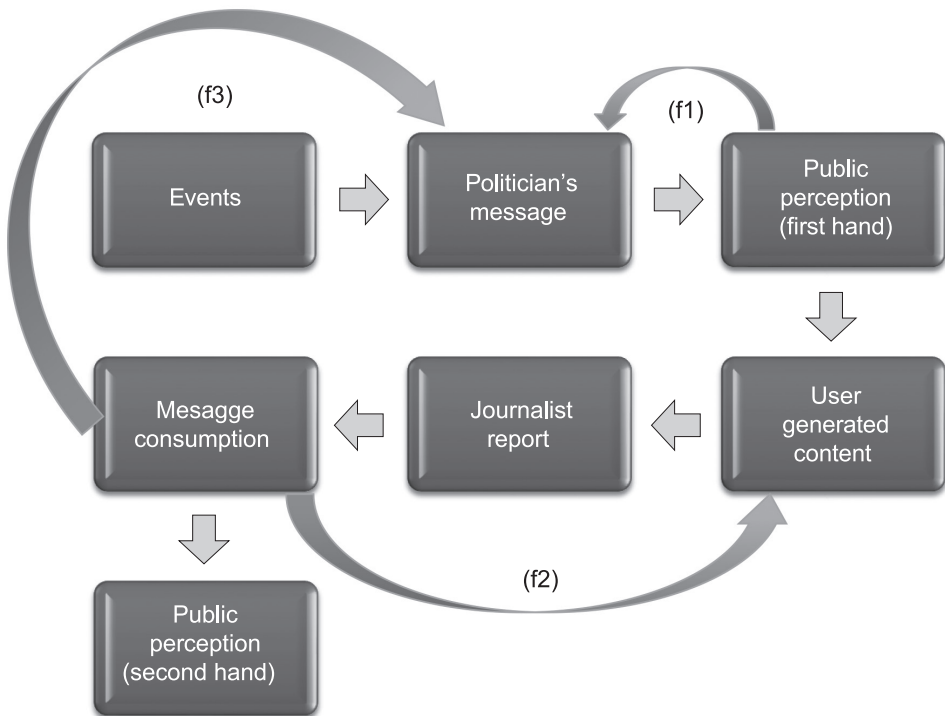


Figure 3. The flow of message/information via social media

Source: Author.

Therefore, the flow of the message through social media is much more dynamic (shown in Figure 3) as the traditional flow was almost one-way. The public's perception, which takes the message directly from the politician's Facebook page, gives the first feedback to that message (f1). Another reaction comes from the way the message is consumed and its distribution from the people in social media (f2), as well as feedback that can be sent to the politician as his message has been reported by the journalist (f3).

Thus, social media gives possibilities to politicians themselves, in relation to the public.

— By using social media, a politician can transmit their message to the public in the way they want, without becoming a “pledge” of the editor or journalist;

— Through social media, the politician has the opportunity to set the political agenda and media agenda as well, as their posts on Facebook or Twitter almost always become news;

— News broadcasts on television or articles published in the newspaper are usually discussed in social media. The politician uses social media to discuss with the public without the need for a third party, without being interviewed in a studio, or without being a guest at a discussion table;

— In promoting their political actions, politicians use social media to create a positive image as they wish;

— Interactivity and public conversations are other features that social media has provided to the politician in the digital era. They can use them to mobilise voters, to persuade them to support or to inform them about different issues;

— Social media ‘dissolve’ institutional and bureaucratic barriers for a citizen to discuss with a politician. Using Facebook or Twitter, the politician can interact more often and easier with the public who expresses interest.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA AND ELECTIONS**

The role of the media to share the message of political actors to the public is irreplaceable but in recent years the campaigning strategy has changed compared to the traditional one. A new form of social media use has been developed as a very important tool for political communication. Regardless of which of the political actors has been adopted earlier in social media, today, each of them is aware of the power of social media in the public sphere. Evins (2017), referring to the United States of America, claims that since 2008, social media has brought a growing trend for voters to use these media to contact political actors. This trend covered the political spectrum and in that year began the great use of Facebook for campaigning by former US President Barack Obama. The growing trend for the use of social media is two-fold, alongside the public, and political actors in each party have been more active on social media. In Kosovo, the use of Facebook began in 2009 and over the years, it grew until the 2017

elections, which could be considered the first in the Kosovo state where social media has been an important part of the campaigns of all political parties.

However, Jackson and Lilleker (2009, p. 247) point out that with all the interactivity that social networks provide, “parties appear to be adopting social media to their own needs, creating a hybrid of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0”. For this mix, Jackson and Lilleker use the term ‘Web 1.5’, as, according to them, political parties do not use full web 2.0 technology, but neither web 1.0, and “This reflects extensive use of the architecture of participation, but much less use of the community’s democratic structure” (2009, p. 248).

Ferber, Foltz, and Pugliese (2007), based on the McMillan model of interactivity in two-way communication (2002), offer a new model that is enabled by web 2.0 technology and according to them, this new model of interactivity includes multi-way communication.

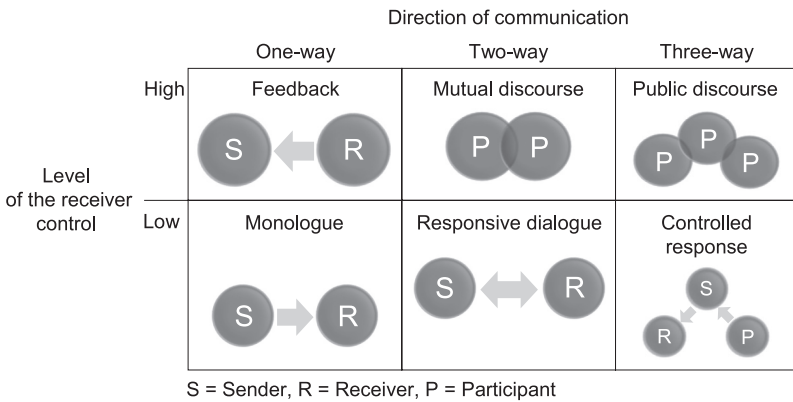


Figure 4. Six-part model of cyber interactivity

Source: Ferber et al., 2007.

In McMillan’s (2002) model of communication, we have the sender and the recipient but Ferber et al. (2007) have added another element, the participant. This model, which also envisages multi-directional communication, at the low level of control by the recipient “includes controlled responses and public discussion” (Ferber et al., 2007, p. 394). But when it comes to feedback, then there can be no linear or one-way communication. In one-way communication, the message or information is transferred to the receiver and there is no feedback to the sender. When there is feedback in communication then there is two-way communication but in the model of Ferber et al. (2007) this is conceived differently. Therefore, in one-way communication there should be only the monologue and if it is feedback, then it passes on two-way communication. Feedback is understandable in the case of dialogue or mutual discourse.





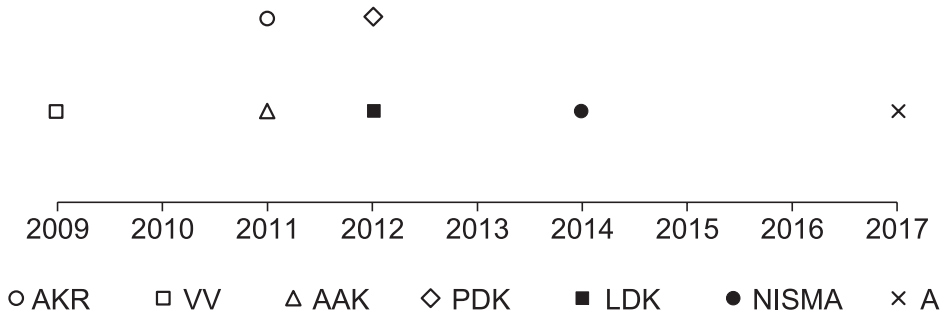


Figure 5. Adaptation of Kosovar political parties to Facebook

Source: Author.

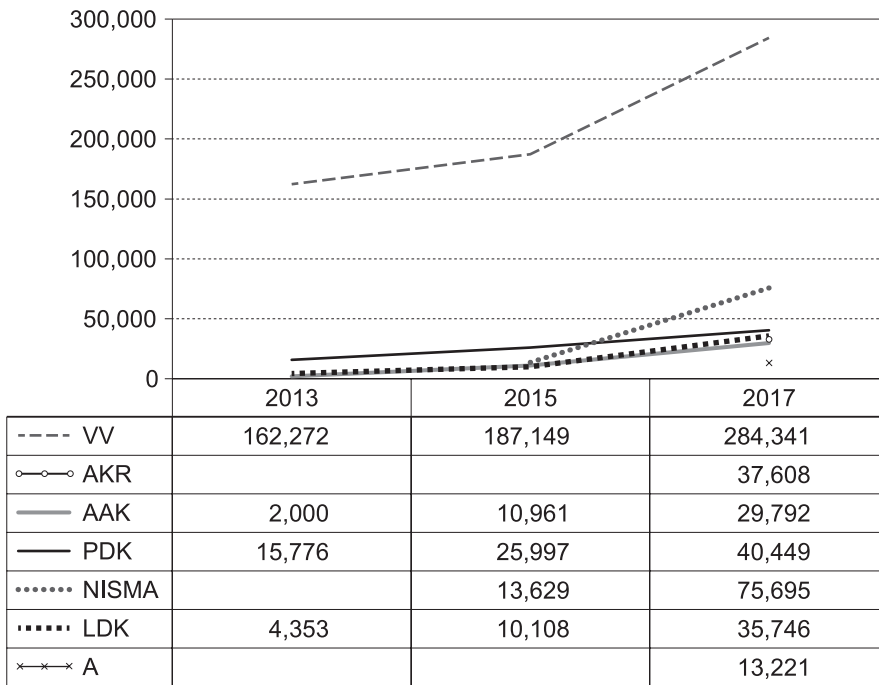


Figure 6. The likes of party pages on Facebook in the years 2013–2017 (in numbers)

Source for 2013 and 2015: Gërguri, 2016.

Source for 2017: Author, 14 November 2017.

parties compared to the LDK, PDK or AAK, have adopted Facebook more quickly, and they use this social media continuously.

In 2011, two other parties (AAK and AKR) began to include Facebook in their strategies for political communication. One year later, the two oldest parties, LDK and PDK, created their own Facebook pages. On 28 February 2014, a new party was

created, NISMA, a social democratic party and on the same day, this party created a Facebook page. Meanwhile, the Alternativa party, two days before its official establishment, had created its Facebook page. This points to the power of social media in today's political communication in Kosovar society.

Another characteristic of Kosovar political parties is the changing nature of the web page. The PDK initially, and later the LDK, had changed the pages by closing them in 2012. The PDK did so in October 2013 and the LDK in July 2016.

The party first adapted to Facebook, VV, has also created the largest network within it. According to data gathered on Facebook on 14 November 2017, VV has 284,341 likes, more than the other six parties put together. In second position is the party NISMA the second youngest party represented with a deputy in the Assembly of Kosovo, after Alternativa. "The Internet has truly become a new civic arena, but not all citizens are equally present in this venue. Those who pay attention to politics or government on the internet tend to be the young [...]" (Mossberger, 2009, p. 175) and that is the main reason why the new political parties in Kosovo are very focused on Facebook. Recently, every political party engages in political communication through social media.

### USING FACEBOOK FROM KOSOVAR POLITICIANS IN THE 2017 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The 2017 general election could be considered the first election where Facebook had a very important place during the election campaign. Each political party, realising the importance of Facebook to reach out to the audience, especially those voters under the age of 40, used it every day. Demographic data in Kosovo prioritise Facebook as an important tool in political communication.

Table 2. Demographic data and the use of the internet in Kosovo

	Total	%
Total population	1,907,592	100%
Citizens with voting rights	1,872,941	98.16%
Internet users (I.U.)	1,523,373	79.86%
Total Facebook users (Fb.U.)	860,000	56.45% of I.U.
Fans of Facebook's political pages	516,852	60.1% of Fb.U.

Source: *The World Factbook*, 2018; *Internet World Stats*, 2017.

The total number of Kosovo residents is 1,907,592 based on *The World Factbook* of CIA (2018). Internet users in Kosovo are 1,523,373 (*Internet World Stats*, 2017), so, 79.86% of the total population. So, nearly 80% of Kosovo's residents use the internet while 516,852 are followers of political parties on Facebook or 33.93% of them. Of those who use Facebook, 60.1% of them follow the political parties on Facebook.

During the election campaign for the 2017 elections, political parties were very active on Facebook, and in particular the New Kosovo Alliance (AKR), which had 170 posts during the campaign. This is a coincidence because the AKR is not known for its great use of Facebook to communicate with citizens, unlike VV, which has always been the leader regarding the exploitation of this social network to reach the population.

From 2012, when the AKR created a page in Facebook, the most dynamic period was during the election campaign. Therefore the AKR surprised many with the way it used Facebook during the election. Meanwhile, VV uses it consistently in the same form and with a positive trend, as can be seen in Figure 7.

In these elections, VV had 77 posts in total and only in the two days of the campaign had it intensified its engagement on Facebook, as can be seen in the Table 3, which represents the number of Kosovar political party posts on each day of the campaign.

Table 3. Total number of political parties’ posts during the election campaign

Name of party	Number of posts	Name of party	Number of posts
AAK	60	NISMA	63
AKR	170	PDK	47
A	76	VV	77
LDK	31		

Source: Author.

The Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) was the only party that did not make any posts on one day, that is, on the seventh day of the campaign, while on the last day of the campaign it posted 16 times, almost half of the posts made in the other nine days of the campaign. The Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) was the party that launched the campaign with 15 posts in the first two days but then there were almost the same number until the end of the campaign.

On 8 out of 10 campaign days, the AKR occupied the largest space on Facebook, having been more active than the other parties. This party had an average of 17 posts per day. The most passive Facebook party during the campaign was the LDK, only 31 posts in total, or about three posts a day.

The number of comments and the distribution of posts supposedly pushing voters to discuss party posting measure the political party’s interactivity on Facebook. In the 2017 general elections in Kosovo, the party which created the widest virtual network on Facebook is VV. The AKR, even though it had the largest number of posts (170), the interactivity of this party and its Facebook network is smaller than the LDK, despite the LDK having only 31 posts during the campaign. See Table 4 that shows the total number of posts, likes, comments, and distributions.

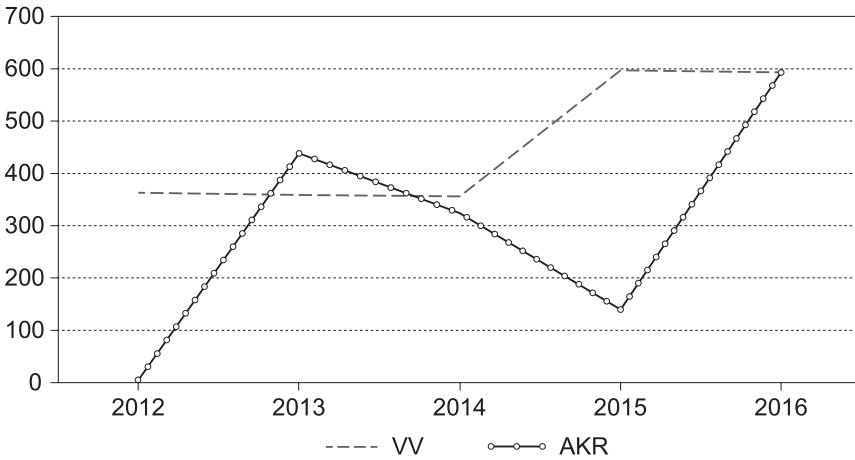


Figure 7. AKR and VV posts in the period 2012–2016 (in numbers)

Source: Author.

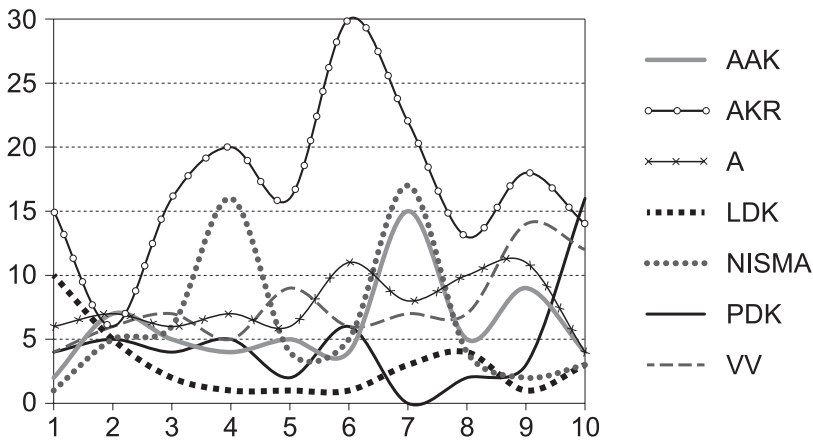


Figure 8. Daily posting of political parties during the campaign (in numbers)

Source: Author.

Table 4. Interactivity of political parties on Facebook during the campaign

	AAK	AKR	A	LDK	NISMA	PDK	VV
Posts	60	170	76	31	63	47	77
Likes	7,853	21,625	8,830	19,148	8,735	15,317	172,917
Comments	75	341	323	385	117	413	63,138
Shares	47	470	191	891	432	466	17,396

Source: Author.

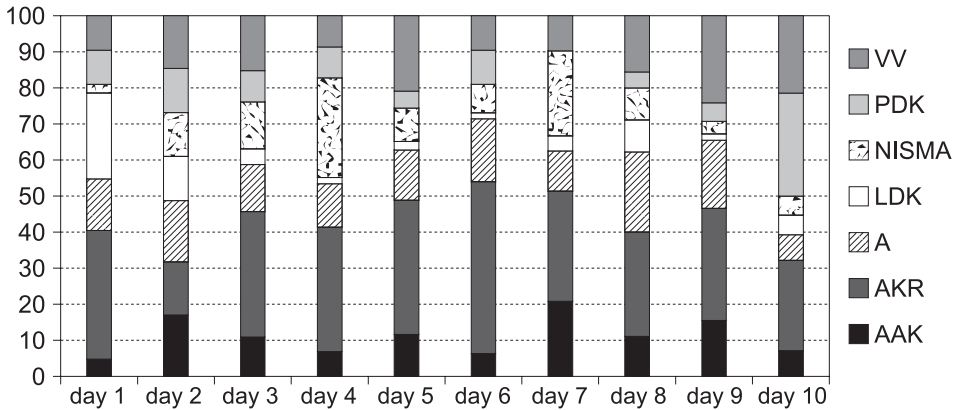


Figure 9. Daily posting of political parties during the campaign (in percent)

Source: Author.

### ANALYSIS OF THE TYPE OF FACEBOOK POSTING

Posting on Facebook, based on the study sample, can be divided into two functions: mobilisation, and announcement. The mobilisation function is when the text is intended to mobilise the audience, for example, the text from a politician’s speech or a text calling on the audience to support and vote the party or candidate. The AKR used this twice as often as other parties, 88 times. The ARK wrote to mobilise voters in more than 50 percent of total posts (170 posts) using speeches from the campaign, the party slogan “Hope for Kosovo”, etc. The notifying post is the text that simply fulfills the notification function without having the argument element structure. Alternativa and VV have mostly used this form of text, 34 and 30 times, respectively.

Table 5. Types of Facebook posts

		AAK	AKR	A	LDK	NISMA	PDK	VV
Mobilisation	Speech	1	40	5	3	1	1	4
	Mobilise to vote	2	48	34	10	16	19	35
	Total	3	88	39	13	17	20	39
Announcement	Announcement of an event	0	7	11	6	1	0	27
	Different announcements	0	13	23	6	2	9	3
	Total	0	20	34	12	3	9	30

Source: Author.

Parties always use symbols in their posts, for example, the # symbol used to identify the message with a certain topic. Only NISMA from all of the parties never used the # symbol in its posts. ‘#BashkëTëVendosur’ (‘#TogetherDetermined’) was the most widely-used slogan during the campaign, from the three coalition parties, LDK, AKR, and Alternativa, while in Table 6 you can see other slogans, either of the three above-mentioned parties or of other parties.

Table 6. Use of the # (hashtag) symbol from political parties in their posts during the campaign

Party's name	Slogan
LAA coalition	#TogetherDetermined
A	#Kosovo has an Alternative
PDK	#The New Beginning
VV	#with Heart
LDK	#for Kosovo that we Want
AKR	#Hope for Kosovo

Source: Author.

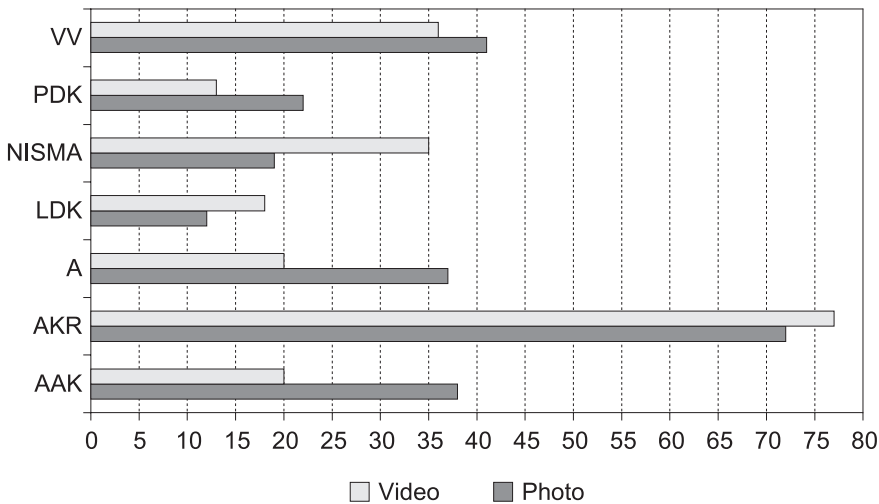


Figure 10. Photo and video posts from political parties during the campaign (in numbers)

Source: Author.

Postings also differ in type. On Facebook, aside from posts that contain only text, there are also posts with photos and video posts. Figure 10 compares posts that contain photos or videos. The AKR, NISMA, and the LDK have posted more videos than photos, while other parties have preferred more photos.

## CONCLUSIONS

This research has been done in order to analyse the use of Facebook where political communication can take place in continuity, even in real time. The paper analysed the use of Facebook by Kosovar political parties during the general election campaign in June 2017 and focused on the form and types of posting of those parties. Facebook, as a new media in the digital media era, offers the opportunity to send a message to the public without the involvement of traditional media and this is one of the changes that this social media has brought to political communication. In addition to the change in the flow of information, another element is the function of the media as a channel for sending the message. Traditional media can be considered more independent and more professional because the information there is screened from some professional filters before being passed on to the public whilst using Facebook as a channel, the message is sent to the public bypassing the traditional media and method of their transmission. Consequently, the official website of the party on Facebook plays the role of the party media, since it is ultimately in the function of the party itself, and does not have the public interest in the first place, which preoccupies more traditional media.

Hypothesis 1: An opposite party is more likely to early adopt Facebook and more likely to use Facebook actively. This hypothesis is correct as the first party which adapted to Facebook, VV, is an opposition party. VV was in opposition even in 2009, as it still is today. Being an early adopter, VV has the largest virtual network from all Kosovar political parties with 284,341 likes on its Facebook page, more than the other six parties combined. NISMA, another new party in Kosovo's political spectrum, has adapted to Facebook from the first day of its functioning, in the context of the use of this social network for political communication. This party is second with the number of likes, with 75,695 likes.

Hypothesis 2: Kosovar political parties use Facebook more for announcement than for mobilisation of voters. The form of Facebook posting most used by Kosovar political parties is the mobilising text. This type of text positively influences the quality of communication of the political party with the public, because the politician to be closer to the citizen uses the social network, and at the same time, they send the message to the public to promote their political actions and to persuade them to support it. The mobilising text is prevalent in each party, in relation to the announcement text. In total, 219 posts of seven political parties have the structure of the mobilising text, which in addition to the arguments also contains symbols that characterise texts on social networks, such as Facebook or Twitter, while 108 posts were as an announcement.

There are about 1 million Facebook users in Kosovo and all political parties want to get as many followers as they can. This explains the high use of Facebook by political parties during the 2017 general elections. These are the first elections where Facebook was one of the main tools for political campaigning. The informational



and announcement posts did not dominate their communication because the parties used a lot of mobilising speeches and messages in their communication in order to attract the attention of the public, therefore the mobilisation function dominates the form of Facebook posts. The paper also analyses the adaptation of Kosovar political parties with this new form of political communication, and parties' age and competition are identified as important for the adoption of Facebook. Opposition parties were more interested in using Facebook as a tool and VV, as an opposition party, started to use Facebook to challenge the government and also to mobilise their supporters. NISMA started to use Facebook on the same day it was formed. Having paid attention to social media, this party, from 2015 to 2017 increased six-fold the number of followers on its Facebook page. Parties' age is identified as an important factor because VV, NISMA, and Alternativa, as new parties compared to the LDK, PDK or AAK, have adopted faster to Facebook and they use this social media continuously. Furthermore, Alternativa created a Facebook page two days before its official establishment.

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