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TECHNOLOGIES OF EUROPEAN ELECTORAL PRACTICES IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITALIZATION OF SOCIETY

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Abstract

This article considers the peculiarities of European politicians image-building as exemplified by recently held election campaigns (by the example of the President of France Emmanuel Macron), since the general elections of the heads of state are the most technologically advanced and the most significant in terms of image-building, thereto representing new models of government, they most vividly demonstrate the emerging public demand for new political actors that are capable of dealing with the challenges and pressing issues Europe faces. Among the practical issues of the election process, the questions of technologizing the modern election campaigns are proposed for consideration, including modern practices of building and promoting the image of politicians, the use of technology in the election process, the experience of using populist technologies in European election practice, along with changing communication channels. The basic rules that need to be followed for proper image building are given, such as, for example, the priority influence of the campaign strategy on image formation, the need for the main features and image requirements to correspond to the real qualities of the politician's personality; the need to take into account voting preferences when forming an image; the need to take into account images of rivals when creating a candidate's image. The evidence framework is based on the analysis of public foreign and Russian sources of information, official statistics, analysis of sociological surveys of the population by foreign companies.

Keywords: Election campaign, technological methods, modern trends, image of politicians.

1. Introduction

Today in Europe a public demand has been formed for new political actors that have demonstrated their capability to deal with the challenges and pressing issues Europe faces. Since 2015, Europe has faced a number of trials such as the migration issue, the multicultural crisis, a series of problems associated with separatist sentiments in some countries. Undoubtedly, in a democratic society, these circumstances could not but affect the elections and referenda that took place in 2016-2017 (parliamentary elections in Germany, Austria, presidential elections in France, presidential elections in the Czech Republic and Finland; Brexit and the Catalan independence referendum that that have already left a mark in history etc.) (Bader, 2014). As for the above events, one would definitely consider them significant and remember the contradictory nature of the election campaigns and political processes throughout Europe and all over the world (Rodionova, Belokonev, Seleznev, & Yezhov, 2018).

Among the practical issues of the election process, issues of technology modernization in the modern electoral process are proposed for consideration, including modern practices of building and promoting the image of politicians, the use of technology in the election process, the experience of using populist technologies in European election practice, along with changing communication channels.

2. Problem Statement

The problem of populism in Western politics has garnered wide attention over the past few years and it has directly influenced the process of building and promotion of politicians' images. The image of political leaders at all levels plays a significant role, especially during the election campaigns of candidates and future heads of state. In the new models of state governance in a dynamically changing society, the creation and proper use of political leader image becomes particularly relevant both due to the demand for a new positioning of a leader domestically and abroad, and in order to establish and constantly maintain various types of channels of communication with society. A politician's personal image awareness has recently become a required condition and component of a successful political career (Hobolt & De Vries, 2015). It is in European practice and especially during the election campaigns that the most vivid examples of various strategies for building and promoting politicians' images are used when making an image. Thus, for example, avoiding the party's image and using the brand of a personal name, as S. Kurz did ("The movement – Sebastian Kurz list") during the election campaign, led him to success at the initial stage. The current trend for Europe and others is much higher personification.

3. Research Questions

The research questions were the reasons for the formation of new politician's image building and promotion technologies in modern European that generate a public demand for new political actors. Attention is also paid to the most striking technologies in electoral practices used by modern European politicians during election campaigns. The study allows predicting candidate success based on the image-making technologies they use.

4.   Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study is to consider the peculiarities of image-building technologies used by European politicians in the context of the digital transformation of public administration and global informatization of society by the example of recent election campaigns. The general elections of the heads of state are the most technologically advanced and the most significant in terms of image-building, they most vividly demonstrate the tough rivalry of individuals and the struggle of images. The aim of the study is also to compare modern European politicians with their predecessors and competitors, to analyze the most striking historical examples. Broadly speaking the aim is to study contemporary technologies in electoral practices used by politicians of today's Europe in the course of their election campaigns.

5.   Research Methods

The evidence framework is based on the analysis of public foreign and Russian sources of information, official statistics. It is also based on a secondary analysis of sociological surveys of population by foreign companies during the election campaigns of European politicians. The most relevant events of modern Europe were analyzed, starting with Brexit, the Catalan independence referendum, the presidential election in France, the parliamentary election in Austria, etc.

6.   Findings

First of all, it is essential to note a certain sequence in building a politician's image, starting from defining the public demand, correlating the real qualities of the candidate with the expectations of citizens, and finally conversing the selected qualities to various sign systems and series of events. We will define the concept of image as "a stereotypical image of a politician or a public figure specially built during the targeted action program" according to Kara Murza (2015, p.241).

A politician is required to have credibility and generate sympathy, which makes it essential to build a leader's image that reflects the expectations of citizens and the electorate. For example, the candidate must look good on television, be wealthy enough and succeed in previous activities, enjoy the reputation of an exemplary family man (Myakotkina, 2007). Especially important is the timely use of this or that image at one time or another; a public request for a new political leader should be generated. French sociologists, for example, recorded a request to update the political elite of France, and Emmanuel Macron was the response to this request.

A successful candidate's image during the election campaign facilitates and simplifies the solution of such campaigning tasks as: introducing the candidate's image into the public awareness of voters; increasing the degree of popularity of the candidate and attention to his candidacy; building a candidate's position among opponents; gaining the sympathies and trust of voters, creating a positive psychological attitude for the perception of any information regarding the course of the election campaign in a manner favorable for the candidate; neutralization of negative information about the candidate; facilitating the recruitment of supporters into the team; building confidence that the candidate is the best candidate for the selected post from among the others running in the district; building an active voting support for this candidate.

When building an image, it is necessary to follow certain rules, such as, for example, the priority influence of the campaign strategy on image formation, the need for the main features and image requirements to correspond to the real qualities of the politician's personality; the need to take into account voting preferences when forming an image; the need to take into account images of rivals when creating a candidate's image (Stecker, 2015).

The election of the President of France Emmanuel Macron immediately began to be associated with the expectations of the vigorous actions of a young and ambitious politician towards strengthening the international authority of his country. It can be stated that the French presidential election in 2017 took place in rather severe environment and in stiff competition, amid a crisis not only of two centrist parties, but also against the backdrop of a long-lasting failure of the country's economic development and, hence, depressed moods, feelings of frustration and rejection of political elites by citizens (De Tinguy, 2017). Financial scandals and intrigues, a series of corruption scandals, and the fight against compromising evidence have affected the loss of voters' confidence in systemic politicians and the political class as a whole. In particular, previous presidents failed to demonstrate significant success in politics and economics. During his election campaign, Macron deviated from the adopted strategy, which was based on traditional parties and classical programs, and had turned to a network populist movement in which he combined neoliberal values in the economy with the obligations of the social state and social protection of the population.

The need to study the transformation of public administration and new government models is based largely on maintaining and promoting the image of a leading politician. In this dynamically changing society, an image of a modern politician is determined by changing the communication channels with citizens from traditional media to the Internet, social networks, and the blogosphere. For a political, state or business actor, it seems important to build their activities and positioning, to promote their image through mastering modern technologies and, above all, information, which is reflected in the Internet environment and its interactive services system (Efimova & Makoveychuk, 2012). It is the Internet environment that contributes to building and promotion of an international image. Image building is possible both for internal and external environment, the international community in our case.

6.1. The image of the president with the face of a monarch and the image of a peacemaker

Creating an international image, Macron's positioning was similar to a monarch, reasonable and rational, conciliatory, who reasonably conducts dialogue and participates in the resolution of international conflicts; who hears and takes into account all points of view. This image is also broadcasted for Macron's in country positioning, for the French population. Macron places greater focus on the use of social networks. As for the first steps in electing Macron as president of the fifth republic, the word "monarchy" was repeated very often, although Macron's image strategy has been slightly corrected since then and the scope of the task set for him to reengage France into active foreign policy became noticeable.

A series of meetings held in the first few months by Macron with such heads of state as Putin, Merkel, Trump, Libyan Prime Minister Faiz Saraj, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan aimed to demonstrate one thing: Paris seeks to occupy a more significant place in the process of resolving international conflicts, strives to be more involved in world political processes in general.

In terms of image strategies, the meetings with leaders of major world powers such as Putin and Trump served as important signals to the international community that France claimed a more significant role in the international space, emphasizing the importance of transatlantic unity as an essential element of France's foreign policy and paying great attention to the affairs of the European continent (Berend, 2016). It is also interesting that, to emphasize the importance and duration of relations with other countries, the Macron team skillfully used historical dates: the meeting with Putin took place in honor of the 300th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Russia and France, and the meeting with Trump was timed to the 100th anniversary of the American Entry into World War I.

6.2. Peculiarities of Macron's communication strategy - reclusive president

Macron's image was also influenced by foreign policy events, for example, the election of Trump as US president and massive leakage of confidential information to media, have corrected the behavior model of the newly elected French president.

Initially, it was planned to create an image of a politician who is ready for an open dialogue with society, who is more transparent than his processors. The image-makers took into account the mistakes of the communicative strategy of previous colleagues, for example, Francois Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy, who often communicated with the press and allowed reporters to the very backstage of the political process, which partly led to their defeat. Subsequently, restricted communication with journalists and tight control over relations between senior officials and the media established a clear distance between the journalistic community and the president. Many experts drew a parallel with Francois Mitterrand, who also distanced himself from journalists, which allowed both to dignify himself in public and prevent uncontrolled and undesirable moments, to avoid large reputation losses, which ultimately helped preserve the monarchy image.

Unlike his predecessors, Macron became the "silent president" since the ritual interview with journalists was canceled on July 14, the practice of interviewing without a microphone was stopped. The experience and communication system of previous colleagues distanced Macron from traditional methods of communicating with journalists to other methods, for example, creating visual images in most cases through television: Macron shakes hands with Putin, takes a military parade, encourages dialogue between implacable enemies, etc.

6.3. The Impact of Unpopular Reforms on the Macron Image

Inside France Macron faces great difficulties in building an image. This is also due to the fact that the populist statements made during the election campaign already raised doubts about implementation. However, it is worth noting that the elements of populism were present in the strategies of most politicians who aspire to gain the majority of votes.

Macron inherited many problems from Francois Hollande (many measures were laid down in the budget for 2017 by President Hollande) and the new administration was faced with the need to carry out unpopular reforms such as reducing social support for the population, reducing army funding, and reforming labor laws, which have already become a serious challenge for the young president, causing a wave of protests in many cities in France (Zielonka, 2015).

It was not easy for Macron, because he was faced with complex tasks and unpopular measures. At the same time, it is necessary to note the work of a professional PR and communications experts team, as evidenced by the reasonable statements, which possibly allowed him to avoid large reputation losses.

The results of a survey conducted by the Ifop sociological service show an increase in approval of the French president's policies. In early January 2019, Macron's approval rating was 28%, while in December 2018 only 23% of the French supported the head of the French state. The level of trust has grown in the age group of 65 years and above and among workers. The survey was conducted on-line from January 3 to January 4 and involved 1014 people over the age of 18 (Institut d'études opinion et marketing en France et à l'international (2019).

The nature of the downgrade of Macron's rating does not pose serious threats in the short term, since it is secured by a stable majority in the National Assembly and is protected by its close-knit team, competitors are weakened. The decline in the rating is explained by Macron's attempts to systematically implement a long-term modernization program requiring victims from most social groups. Macron understands what challenges exist for France in the modern world. In the long run, threats to future 2022 presidential elections are obvious.

7. Conclusion

During the election campaigns by European politicians, the emphasis was made on the use of modern technical communication tools, as well as information technologies, primarily in social networks, which have already become a more solid communication platform. The use of such modern technologies as a hologram for example, by Melanchon – when he was speaking in one place, a moving hologram was broadcasted at meetings of supporters in several cities at the same time. By the example of building and promotion of the image of the President of France, it is necessary to note the work of a professional team of PR and communications experts, which allowed him to avoid large reputation losses. The past election campaigns in Europe have proven that there is a public demand for new political actors, capable of changing public administration.

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