

# **Social Media in Political Communication: How do Greek political parties use Twitter during the pre-electoral period?<sup>1</sup>**

Dr Stamatis Poulakidakos, University of Athens  
&  
Dr Anastasia Veneti, Bournemouth University

**This research is work in progress**

## **Abstract**

During the last three years, public discourse in Greece has focused on the economic crisis, its causes and the ways to confront it. Despite the intense interest of politicians, journalists and citizens, the quantitative generalization of public discussions has not contributed to a qualitative enhancement of public discourse on vital issues of public interest. The predominance of a sentimental approach by the traditional media has contributed considerably in the creation of a state of tension and polarization in the Greek society. Taking into consideration the widespread use of social media by politicians around the world, this research aims to assess Twitter as a new medium of information dissemination and dialogue in Greece, by examining the tweets of the official press offices of the two biggest Greek political parties, New Democracy (ND) and Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA). Our examination period is the last month before the 2014 European elections, since in pre-electoral periods the political messages on behalf of all involved parties are being increased. We seek to examine whether the political messages “broadcast” within the bilateral and interactive Twitter domain, during the Euro-elections pre-electoral period, contribute in a positive way to the public discussion on issues of public interest, by promoting the exchange of rational argumentation instead of the sentimental approach on the crisis that conquers other- unilateral- media content. Moreover, we will explore in what way has Twitter affected the modes of political communication in Greece and how has this contributed as a new campaigning tool. Our research methods are quantitative content analysis and thematic analysis of the pre-electoral tweets of the two biggest Greek parties.

## **Introduction**

Internet has transformed the way political communication has been conducted in most parts of the world. The advent of social media such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter led to a modernisation of political communication (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Carpenter, 2010). Politicians around the world have increasingly sought to capitalize on the new opportunities offered by Web. 2.0 applications and they embarked on new campaigning strategies, new modes of fundraising, mobilization and information gathering. As any new communication

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<sup>1</sup> This paper constitutes an executive summary of a research in progress. There is only partial presentation of the research data. In this form, it was presented in the 65<sup>th</sup> Annual International PSA Conference (30<sup>th</sup> March-1<sup>st</sup> April 2015, Sheffield). For more information please contact Dr Anastasia Veneti [aveneti@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:aveneti@bournemouth.ac.uk) or Dr Stamatis Poulakidakos [s.poulakidakos@gmail.com](mailto:s.poulakidakos@gmail.com)

practice, the use of Information Communication Technologies in political communication has both triggered hopes of its potential democratic impact, as well as raised concerns for impending adversities.

In particular, Twitter has been heralded as a new tool of online campaigning and electorate engagement. Taking into consideration the widespread use of social media by politicians around the world, this research aims to assess Twitter as a new medium of information dissemination and dialogue in Greece, by examining the tweets of the official press offices of the two biggest Greek political parties, New Democracy (ND) and Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA). The examination period is the last month before the 2014 European elections, since in pre-electoral periods the political messages on behalf of all involved parties are being increased.

### **The Greek case**

In April 2010, the Greek government signed the bailout treaty [Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)] with the “troika” i.e. the European Union, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank (Varoufakis, 2014). In simple terms, this treaty offered guaranteed loans to Greece, but in return Greece should practice severe economic policies - among which austerity measures and deep structural reforms - so as to diminish the country’s fiscal debt. As a result of the crisis and the ensuing economic policies, the political realm in Greece has undergone significant transformations (Triandafyllidou et al., 2013). The two big political parties (PASOK- social-democratic party and New Democracy- conservative right wing party), which used to gain the elections for a period of more than 30 years (since 1974), have both suffered significant losses and new political parties have emerged. Within this political context, the radical left wing party (SYRIZA) has dramatically increased its political power, from 4.6% of the electoral body in the 2009 general elections, to almost 27% in 2012, when it became the major opposition party.

As a result of the political climate, there are two main elements that characterize contemporary Greeks politics:

- a. During the last four years, public discourse in Greece has focused on the economic crisis, its causes and the ways to confront it. Despite the intense interest of politicians, journalists and citizens, the quantitative generalization of public discussions has not contributed to a qualitative enhancement of public discourse on vital issues of public interest.
- b. Another feature is the intensity of the political debate between the newly established left political power of SYRIZA and the traditional right-wing New Democracy. This intensity is being augmented both by the crisis context and the ideological distance of these parties (left vs. right).

These two characteristics along with the predominance of a sentimental approach in the political discourse (Poulakidakos 2014, Poulakidakos & Veneti, forthcoming 2015) have resulted in the creation of a state of tension and polarization in the Greek society.

For the scope of this research, we try to examine whether propagandistic characteristics are evident in the political discourse that is being developed in Twitter. In particular, propaganda is being exercised in a more intense way during periods of crisis (Lehmann, 2003; Thussu & Freedman, 2003, p. 235). During such periods, a wide use of propaganda methods takes place (one-sided presentation of events, mainly sentimental argumentation, generalizations) so as to influence the audiences in favor of certain interests. Within this context, political elites need propaganda more than ever, as a means of legalizing their decisions and practices before citizens.

Among the variety of propagandistic methods, we underline some basic characteristics:

1. Dissemination of specific- usually unilateral- information.
2. The use of exaggeration aiming at the distortion of either positive or negative (for the propagandist) information.
3. The direct or indirect evocation to fear, hope or desire (evocation to feelings).
4. The use of rhetoric frames so as to promote generic notions (e.g. trust, discreetness) and to organize the meaning and values in ways beyond rational argumentation (Corner, 2007, pp. 674-675).

### **Twitter and Political Communication**

Confronted with declining citizen interest and participation along with a burgeoning distrust of politicians (Rosanvallon, 2008; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Dahlgren, 2009), political parties in Western democracies have turned into the potentials of the new media in order to revive their relationship with the citizens. Both citizens and politicians are increasingly bypassing the traditional modes of political communication and as Carpenter (2010, p. 221) elucidates, they “are utilizing the blogosphere as a way to participate and engage with others.” Participation in these environments is becoming increasingly important as a means of communicating directly to the public in a professional capacity, especially during times of heightened political activity like elections (Burgess & Bruns, 2012, p. 384).

Twitter is one of a range of new social media technologies that allow for the online and instant dissemination of short fragments of data from a variety of official and unofficial sources (Hermida, 2010, p.297). Established in 2006 (Neuhaus & Webmoor, 2012, p. 48), twitter is a microblogging site (Hutchins, 2011, p. 238; Hermida, 2010, p. 298), which allows its members to publish direct messages of up to 140 characters (Ovadia, 2009, p. 202; Armstrong L. & Gao, 2010, p.495). Microblogging is a form of blogging, but smaller. ‘Microblogging applications share a set of similar characteristics: (1) short text messages; (2) instantaneous message delivery; and (3) subscriptions to receive updates’ (Small, A., 2011, p. 874; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011, p.87). In a sense twitter has retrieved the telegram. It is a good telegram: Short little sentences and things that are important for the next five minutes, but not so important after that (Hutchins, 2011, p. 238). The modality of Twitter also extends beyond text-based communication to visual representation, with uploaded ‘twitpics’ (photoFigures)

(Hutchins, 2011, p.239). Moreover, Twitter's role as a platform which supports the ad hoc formation of large online publics debating various topics is aided in part by its underlying structure: the #hashtag system, in particular, makes it possible for users to follow and contribute to such public debates easily even if they have no established connections with (or even knowledge of) other participating users (Ovadia, 2009, p. 204). Interest in politicians' use of Twitter took off when Barack Obama and John Edwards used it to let their supporters know where they were and of upcoming events during the Democratic Party primaries in the United States (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011, p.88).

Twitter's potential has been eulogized by many scholars. Kennedy (2008) argues Twitter has become a powerful tool for campaign reporting and mobilizing and Davis (2010) that it is a significant platform for the diffusion of news and information. Praising the dynamic of Twitter, Cheris Carpenter (2010, p.222) claims that "Twitter has proven to be amazingly adept at two things: politically engaging the average citizen and empowering its users to participate as citizen journalists. [...]Twitter is a one-to-one and one-to many communications powerhouse available to anyone with a cell phone or computer. It is a link to real-time constituent consciousness, and it is marketed as a technology that directly taps into this collective consciousness."

Despite the flourishing use of social media in political campaigning, there are still questions over their substantial capabilities to empower democracy by fostering greater participation, encouraging political conversation and improving interactive information-sharing (Coleman, 2001; Jackson, 2007). Anders Olof Larsson and Hallvard Moe (2011) having examined Twitter users in the 2010 Swedish election campaign stated that "our findings indicate that Twitter falls somewhat short of the expectations held by those most optimistic on behalf of the democratic and disruptive potential of new web tools." (p.742). Mcnamara and Kenning (2011) found that, apart from a few exceptions, politicians used social media as a one-way transmission of political messages, rather than citizen engagement indicating that much of "the social media content was comprised of election slogans, attacking opponents, and political rhetoric – much of it of a banal nature" (p.9).

## **Methodology**

This research aims to assess Twitter as a medium of information dissemination and dialogue in Greece, by examining the tweets of the official press offices of the two biggest Greek political parties, New Democracy (governing party at the time of the research, ND from now on) and Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA major opposition party at the time of the research). The examination period is the last month before the 2014 European elections namely from April 24<sup>th</sup> to May 24<sup>th</sup> (N= 437). We seek to examine whether the political messages "broadcasted" within the bilateral and interactive Twitter domain, during the Euro-elections pre-electoral period, contribute in a positive way to the public discussion on issues of public interest, by promoting the exchange of rational argumentation instead of the sentimental approach on the crisis that conquers other- unilateral- media content. To

understand how social media are being used in political communication in a contemporary context, two types of research questions were developed for this study, one relating to quantitative factors (how many), and one relating to qualitative factors (in what way). The main research questions are:

RQ1: Do the tweets of New Democracy (conservative party) and SYRIZA (left wing party) promote the public dialogue within Twitter on issues of public interest?

RQ2: Do the tweets of the two Greek political parties, New Democracy and SYRIZA, contain propagandistic characteristics?

The research methods adopted were quantitative content analysis and thematic analysis (qualitative), since our analysis focuses on both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the political discourse within Twitter. With the complementary use of these two methods, we seek to quantify the characteristics of the examined tweets and embed them at the same time into the political context of the pre- electoral period. The specific accounts we examined are @PrimeministerGR and @statheramprosta of ND and @a.tsipras of SYRIZA. Our coding unit was the tweet (see Appendix 1). The elaboration of the quantitative results was conducted with the use of SPSS 22.0. The statistic tests used for testing the statistical significance of the results are chi-square and Fisher's exact tests (Gnardellis, 2003). The test used to measure the inter-coder reliability is the North, Holsti, Zaninovich and Zinnes test (North et al., 1963).<sup>2</sup>

### **Research findings (selective)**

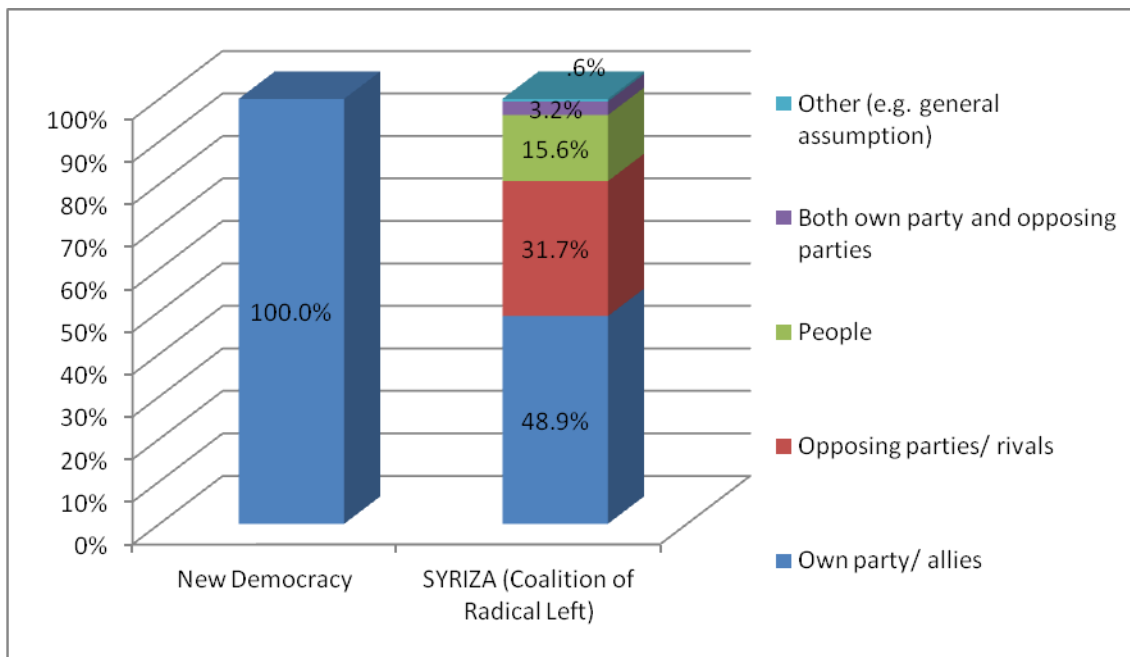
The average number of retweets for New Democracy is 1,76 per tweet and for SYRIZA 10,06. The same very low numbers appear in the favorites category too, i.e. the cases in which a follower marks a specific tweet as favorite. The average favorite bookmarks per tweet is 2,76 for the two New Democracy accounts and 8,84 for the account of SYRIZA party leader Alexis Tsipras. These numbers demonstrate a lack of 'secondary' dissemination- conducted by the followers- of the political messages of the two parties.

As shown in Figure 1, New Democracy's tweets focus exclusively on its own actions or political views, SYRIZA's tweets refer primarily to its own actions and political views (48,9%), secondarily to opposing parties (31,7%) and thirdly to the people- voters (15,6%). These findings can partly be explained by the fact that ND –at that time the governmental party- was primarily interested in highlighting the governmental achievements, whilst SYRIZA, being the opposition party, wished firstly, to persuade the electorate of its own political views and secondly, to underline the inability of the government.

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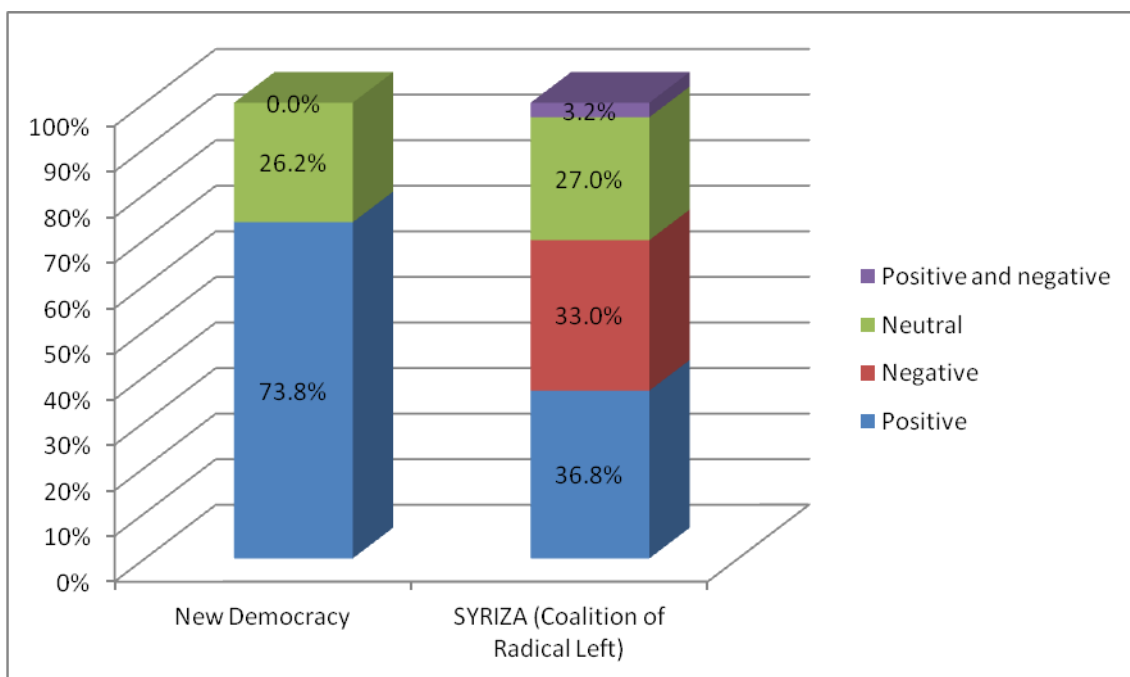
<sup>2</sup>  $R = 2(C1,C2)/(C1+C2)$ , with 70% as the lowest level of credibility. The conduction of the test on both coders provided us with an average of 80% inter-coder reliability.

Figure 1: Whom do the tweets refer to? (per party) (chi square p. value= .000)



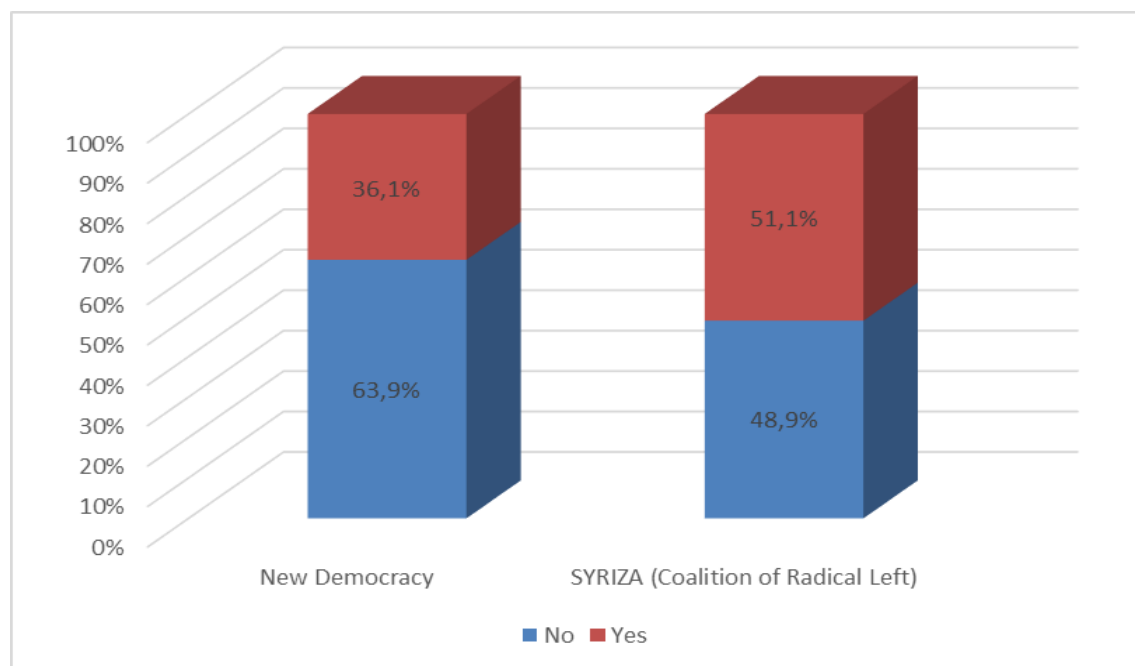
In addition, the tweets of the two parties seem to differ significantly in terms of their either positive or negative character. According to Figure 2, New Democracy tweets mostly in a positive way (73,8%), since it presents its own views, whereas SYRIZA tweets in all different ways in almost balanced percentages (positive, negative and neutral), since a significant part of its communication strategy in Twitter seems to be the negative reference to the political rivals.

Figure 2: Positive or negative character of the tweet per party (chi- square p. value= .000)



An important characteristic of propaganda in discourse is the use of linguistic schemas, such as transfers and metaphors<sup>3</sup>, which are used to promote generic notions (e.g. trust, mistrust, discreetness) and to organize the meaning and values in ways beyond rational argumentation (Theodorakopoulos, 2006; Corner, 2007). According to Figure 3, SYRIZA appears to use such linguistic methods in the majority of its tweets (51,1%), whereas New Democracy relies on such linguistic schemas in the 36,1% of its tweets.

Figure 3: Use of transfers and metaphors per party (chi- square p. value= .005)



Among the most frequently deployed propagandistic methods are the “appeal to hope” and the “appeal to fear/threat”<sup>4</sup>, aiming at the evocation to the feelings of the voters (Snow 2002, Corner, 2007), usually in terms of a better or worse/dystopic future.

Another aspect of propagandistic discourse is the use of unilateral rational argumentation, by the selective presentation of data or other rational arguments on behalf of the propagandist.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Metaphor examples: “the new austerity measures will be a pogrom against the greek society” (@ a.tsipras). “(Mr. Samaras) amputates democracy...” (@ a.tsipras). “Landing of millions of British tourists this year in Greece” (@statheramprosta). Transfer examples: “They take us back to the Miserables of Hugo and Jean Ajean” (@ a.tsipras). “Greece walks the road of Chile and Pinochet” (@ a.tsipras).

<sup>4</sup> Appeal to fear example: “You have agreed for lay-offs in the public sector, reduction of pensions, privatization of everything” (@ a.tsipras). Appeal to hope examples: “2014 will be a year that Greece and Europe will exit the crisis” (@statheramprosta). “A ray of hope for Greece, according to German economist” (@statheramprosta).

Similar to previous research findings concerning the use of “rational” argumentation on behalf of governing and opposing parties (Poulakidakos, 2014), the governing party of New Democracy appears to make use of unilateral rational arguments in a far greater percentage than their political opponents of SYRIZA. Almost 30% of the tweets of New Democracy appear to have a “rational” character, whereas a mere 2,5% of the tweets of SYRIZA can be characterized as rational. In that way the major opposition party appears to rely heavily on the sentimental discourse, a result that coincides with previous empirical findings on the political discourse of the leftist parties in Greece (Poulakidakos, 2014). It is important to note that the total amount of tweets of both parties are characterized by a unilateral rationale, since both rivals try to either promote their own party’s “advantages”, or criticize the opponents’ disadvantages.

### **Thematic analysis findings**

The thematic analysis we deployed for the analysis of the main themes (Aguinaldo, 2012, Ponnam & Dawra, 2013) emerging from the tweets of the two parties, provided us with some significant results related to the communicational strategy followed by the two parties within Twitter throughout the pre-electoral period of May 2014.

The governing party of New Democracy appears to focus on two basic themes: First the positive perspectives of the Greek economy (as result of the government’s policies), through the account @statheramprosta (steadily ahead)- the central catchphrase of New Democracy’s pre-electoral campaign. In a way, these tweets could also serve as an attempt by the government both to reverse the negative public image and to set the stage of the electoral campaign. Second, the pre-electoral activity of the Prime Minister Antonis Samaras through his personal twitter account @PrimeministerGR, since almost the sum of the twitted messages refer to the places and the events that the PM visits and gives speeches as part of his pre-electoral program.

The other official account set up by New Democracy @statheramprosta focused mainly on the achievements of the current government and the already tangible results of the policies implemented during the last two years of the New Democracy administration. In order to appear even more convincing the tweets re-produce comments on Greece and the Greek economy made by mostly foreign actors praising the positive perspectives of Greece, which is in the neat of overcoming the financial crisis.

SYRIZA’s tweets appear to have a rather multidimensional focus: First they try to promote the pre-electoral activity of the party leader, who at the same time was a candidate for the European Commission presidency, second they promote several basic policies that the party

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<sup>5</sup> Selective rational argumentation examples” “Focus mag.: EIB supports small businesses in Greece with 50 million euros” (@statheramprosta). “10,3 bn. Euros surplus in the 2013 travel balance” (@statheramprosta). “30000 new jobs in the next two years” (@statheramprosta).



will seek to implement, if they take the cabinet, third they seek to attack both the governmental policies and the prime minister himself, as well as the foreign political actors supporting the implemented austerity policies and fourth they seek to address the people, especially young ones to support them through their votes in order to cease the implementation of austerity policies. Most important of all, is that the majority of the tweets are quotes taken from A. Tsipras's speeches during his pre-electoral campaign.

### **Concluding remarks**

Based on the data of the research that was conducted, despite the fact that Greek politicians use Twitter extensively, it seems that this has not changed much of the old trends of communicating politics. Neither the examined Greek politicians and parties nor their constituents exploit the new platform in order to immerse themselves in an interlocutory environment. Rather, what is apparent from the thematic analysis of the data is the unfolding of perpetual parallel monologues. In terms of responses and conversations, most of the politicians on Twitter used their tweets in order to broadcast their messages rather than respond or engage in conversation. The great bulk of tweets focused on: attacking the opponent, promoting the party, the politician or particular policies, setting the agenda for the electoral campaign, fostering campaign slogans or election promises. What is noteworthy is that –in the examined sample of tweets- there were no personalised responses.

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## **APPENDIX 1**

Variables of the coding frame

1. Name of the account
2. Party-owner of the account
3. Week of tweet

4. Is it an original tweet or is it a retweet?
5. If a retweet, is it retweeted from another party related account or from an account not belonging to the party?
6. How many times is the tweet re-tweeted?
7. How many times is it marked as “favorite”?
8. Whom does the tweet refer to? (own party/ party allies, political rivals, people)
9. Is the tweet positive or negative?
10. Does it try to debate-“demonize” the political rivals?
11. Does it use transfers, metaphors and other linguistic schemas?
12. Does it include appeal to hope (e.g. bright future)?
13. Does it include appeal to fear/threats (e.g. dark future)?
14. Does it include rational argumentation with the use of data?