BLOG ROLE IN CONSOLIDATING THE IMAGE OF THE CANDIDATE FOR EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

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(Received 23 November 2014, revised 25 March 2015)

Abstract

The blog initiated a change in the information flow on the Internet by supporting the interaction between blogger and reader, as well as between blogger and other bloggers. Through its usage, the blogger-politician can mobilize supporters and voters, attract sponsors, provide information or suggest debate topics for mass-media and electors as well as present themselves in a positive light to public opinion. Starting from the fact that the political blog requires minimum financial investment and enables candidates of competing democratically and evenly in the virtual environment, we will analyse in this article the way in which the political actors enrolled on the competition for the European Parliamentary Elections of 25th of May 2014 used it as a communicative tool during the election campaign to the purpose of consolidating their public image.

Keywords: political blog, Romania, European Parliament, elections, social media

1. Political blog – a communication tool in the election campaigns

Exploiting the desire of the political actors to introduce themselves in a favourable light and to impose their own topics on the electors' agenda, the Internet has proven to be an effective channel for political communication which attracted more and more politicians who have appealed to blogs, personal websites or pages on social networks. In the *Encyclopaedia of Political Communication*, blogs are defined as "online diaries — online forums with chronologically threaded messages — that have mushroomed on the World Wide Web" [1]. Without having advanced technical knowledge, the blog's owner can post different types of materials (videos, articles, pictures, sound recordings and hyperlinks to other sources) and allow visitors to comment on them. Therefore, the blogging politician shows the internauts that he/she is interested in the interaction with the citizens, that he/she is trying to turn the political activity into a more transparent area [2] and to keep up with the times and the evolution of technology [3].

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Considered as "the fifth power in the state" [4], a blog offers political actors an opportunity to rally citizens by a fast news spreading, to provide an alternative source of information for the citizens also interested in other news/perspectives than those offered by the traditional media and to use a more direct, personal style of communication, in close relationship with the internauts. The Political Blog used as a source of information is different than the traditional means of communication, because it is directed only to a few problems which are submitted to the public's attention, it functions as a forum for discussion that encourages interaction and exchange of views between what it says and the people who read it, it hosts multiple perspectives on the same political reality, offering free access to all the latest information [5]. Seen as a form of rallying and political participation, the political blogging intensifies especially during the (pre)election campaign periods when, in addition to public placement of the key political actors, feed-back is to be requested from the readers on these key events, hyperlinks are available to other comments or sources of information and ask citizens explicitly for a form of political action, those met to follow broadcast presidential television debates or to participate in the vote for the most popular [6].

Unlike the traditional media which tend toward objectivity and speak about the public agenda or public interest, a blog can also operate following the logic of the owner's subjectivity. In this case, a political actor's blog is no longer an area of debate on different points of view, but a digital instrument by means of which it tries to persuade visitors to adopt the owner's perspective or to avoid unpleasant/unwanted information [7]. Blogs can serve as a forum for launching acclamations, highlighting present and future achievements, providing evidences to success and, to a lesser extent, attacking opponent candidates and diminishing their results [8]. The same attitude from political bloggers is also manifested towards the online political video broadcasting. Bloggers do not get involved in trans-ideological disputes, most of the times they filter these videos online and post links only to those videos which reinforce what they already believe in, offering readers a unilateral perspective to an aspect or event and having a negative attitude towards those who do not share their convictions [9].

Despite all the shortcomings highlighted in different research, the blog, this form of media as a hybrid between online diary and collective journalism [10], manages to get the internauts' interests worldwide. For example, a survey carried out by Oto Research, in 2008, In Italy [11], shows that Internet users are more demanding on political issues than the rest of electorate and 69% of them have expressed their interest in the participating forums and communities hosted by the website(s) of the political parties, 65% in the blogs of their favourite candidates, 60% in the online publishing of the political programme, 46% in the news delivered by email, 37% in the candidates' videos and 27% in the possibility to create virtual posters.

Another study conducted in the USA in 2010 shows that political blogs are daily read by 9% of the citizens and by 36% of the journalists [10]. Therefore, it remains for the political parties and candidates to different

functions to get to know their target audience as much as possible and to send correct messages in order to inform and stimulate it to produce viral messages to support the causes promoted by the party or the candidate. The research related to the blog's use as a communication tool in different types of elections shows that this instrument is useful for the blogging politician because it offers him/her an opportunity to rally voters and supporters, to attract sponsorships, to provide information or topics for the mass-media and voters, to present themselves in a positive way in the eyes of the public opinion [12].

In Romania, as well, following the worldwide studies available on political communication online [13-15], researchers have inclined towards the evolution of political blogosphere [16-22]. The first study on political blogosphere was performed by Dorina Gutu [17], showing that a political blog is part of the mechanism of legitimacy, an instrument of rallying and direct communication with faithful electors, and a way to influence the media agenda. Romanian politicians have understood that their blogs can be helpful in communicating with their voters and have appealed to this tool due to their wish to build or strengthen their reputation, to benefit from media coverage and a fair overview of their own points of view, to disseminate messages and to have a solid image [22]. Nevertheless, the number of blogging politicians was not high, although they were in the middle of the electoral campaign for the 2008 parliamentary elections: out of the total candidates listed in the first election campaign as unique candidate, only 5.45% appealed to blogs [19].

The results of the research carried out by Tudor Salcudeanu [23] present the evolution of left or right wing blogs over time intervals and highlight the prevalence of the left wingers in the online environment, but they also indicate a high degree of insularity in the Romanian political blogosphere. The dialogue by means of blogs between the representatives of the left and of the right wings is not at random and the intra and inter-ideological communication bridges are rare and encountered only at key-moments. The blogging politician tends to establish as many links to the supporters' favourite blogs and fewer to colleagues or their ideological opponents. The author's conclusion is that the Romanian political blogosphere cannot be considered as an alternative public space.

The fragmentation of the inland political scene is reflected to a large extent in the blogosphere [23, p. 75]. The political blog is not a source of information for any citizen interested in it, but it is an opportunity to have a dialogue with politicians.

The blogging politicians have understood that they can form true virtual communities around their blogs. The 42 blogging politicians of the National Liberal Party (Romanian abbreviation PNL) have assumed their role of initiators of a virtual community and of promoters of the political information also outside the election campaign, presenting to their internaut citizens the problems brought on the public agenda of the National Liberal Party (72.22 %), the solutions offered by this party (68.18%) and the political, socio-economic and cultural values, which constitute the core of the Romanian post-revolution liberalism [20].

Candidates running for president of Romania also appealed to blogs to promote themselves in the 2009 election campaign. The attitude of the campaign as well as the image that they wanted to convey by their postings on the blog was positive, self-centred, and a little aggressive. The candidates isolated themselves in the online communities of supporters and created true 'islands' according to the party affiliation. The actively online candidate accessed his blog less as a platform for debate and more as an instrument of political PR [18] and this fact encouraged to build a political and/or personal brand and allowed the owner to manage his reputation in the virtual environment [16].

2. European Parliament elections' access in the online environment

European Parliament elections are regarded as *second-order elections* [24], because they fail to capture very much attention of the citizens and the media. European citizens' participation in the elections for the European Parliament tend to be, on average, 20% lower than in the national elections [25]. The European Union is far from citizens institutionally (the electorate has no control of it) and psychologically (it is different from national institutions), therefore, citizens find it hard to understand and evaluate it [A. Follesdal and S. Hix, *Why There is a Democratic Deficit in the EU: A response to Majone and Moravcsik*, European Governance Papers (EUROGOV), No. C-05-02, 2005, http://www.connex-network.org/eurogov/pdf/egp-connex-C-05-02.pdf]. In addition, between 1999-2004, in approximately half of the EU member states, the media gave a low attention to the EP elections, and the EU was mainly negatively presented [26]. Things slightly improved on the occasion of 2009 elections, when EU became more visible in the media of 27 European countries, being presented in a better light when compared with the previous elections and in positive terms mostly for the new member countries in comparison with the oldest [27].

Observing this low presence in the European Parliament elections and the occurrence of Euro-scepticism on the political scene, some researchers are promoting the EU democratic deficit thesis [28, 29]. The political solutions identified for overcoming or decreasing the democratic deficit have been more than one, but, in this study, we will focus on the one suggested by Anderson & McLeod [30]. They believe that the European democratic deficit is essentially a deficit of communication caused by the lack of specialists in communication around the members of the European Parliament, insufficient funds dedicated to communication or deficiencies related to the communication of the EP accomplishments to the wide public. It is therefore recommended to both reduce the communication gap between the political actors and citizens, and modernise the communication strategies of the European institutions with the media.

After the Internet has proved its qualities as a good political communication tool, the European politicians have also begun to use it to communicate with their citizens. At first, they used websites and blogs [31-36]. Accordingly, they have been able to provide, at different rates from one country

to another, information to visitors, to strengthen their personal reputation by offering as many data about their public or private life, to focus on supporters or other candidates and to maintain relations with them in order to involve them in various events in the election campaign and share data and audiovisual materials.

After analysing the websites of the political parties in the four European countries included in the study, the authors found clear differences in the communication styles specific to pro or anti-EU parties. The websites of anti-EU parties tend to use more the informational component and do not encourage interaction with visitors, while the pro-EU parties use many strategies to initiate debates on EU enlargement and to strengthen the arguments already supplied by the Euro-optimistic citizens [33].

The campaign in 2009 for the EP elections dedicated the systematic use as well to other online applications, such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, MySpace and Flickr [37]. Practically, the 2009 campaign was the first one in which most candidates and political parties used web 2.0 successfully. The use of the internet technologies in political communication at the EU level is omnipresent, according to all the free services offered by various online platforms that would allow users to receive and generate content, but also as a result of the implementation of the digital agenda of the European Commission [38].

In Romania, the European Parliament elections took place in 2007, 2009 and 2014. The election campaigns, their conduct and the effects of these elections carried out in the Romanian offline environment have caught the attention of several researchers [39-42]. However, for the way in which they have been successful in the online environment, there is only the study made by Aparaschivei [21]. He analysed the way in which the Romanian politicians used their blogs as a tool for strengthening the image in the EP campaigns for 2007 and 2009 and pointed out that politicians have primarily focused on the political and human dimensions in their communication by means of blogs. The other two components, the professional dimension and the taking over of the European Parliament seat have benefited from an extremely low attention from the blogging politician who has overlooked in its own notes even his / her own experience acquired in the European Parliament. In their blogging notes, the politicians have not dealt with particular topics related to the European space, from the projects which they claimed or will support in EP, not managing to bring Europe closer to the citizens. In the two campaigns, the analysed blogs had a small number of readers and the politicians' communication has focused especially on attacking opponents, on populism and on promoting the interests of the parties they were members of. The interactivity of the online communication left seriously much to be desired in 2007, because the analysed politicians did not offer a fast and constant feedback to the comments posted by visitors. In 2009, there was an improvement in the blogger-visitor interaction by the presence of a larger number of replies to comments, campaign movies and photos.

3. Case study - the Romanian EP candidates and their performance on their blogs

The 2014 EP elections took place on May 25th and the 32 MP positions appointed for Romania brought to the start of the election campaigns 500 candidates, 13 political parties, 2 electoral alliances and 8 independent candidates. A simple assessment of the European nominations indicates that all the parties, from governing to opposition parties, have kept significantly their current MPs on the eligible seats, the rate of renewal being much lower compared to the European average. In addition, the lists proposed by the biggest parties, except the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (DUHG) and Liberal Democratic Party (DLP), placed the relatives of the political parties' leaders on the eligible positions. On these lists, the extremists, nationalists, ultra-populist or characters with anti-EU speech are missing [D. Tapalagă, *Alegeri europarlamentare. La vremuri noi, tot ei*, Hotnews, 2014, http://m.hotnews.ro/stire/16863924].

In Romania, maybe even more than in the other EU member countries, the European ideas have encountered a very low interest, namely they have been perceived by the public as having a secondary importance in relation to the national elections and determine some tendencies of electoral behaviour: a high rate of absentees, penalising the governing parties, voting for small parties/peripheral, atypical candidates as well as national topics often encountered in public debates. Neither the media nor the public opinion was closely interested in the MEP's activity. During the 2007 campaign, the referendum for the uninominal vote outclassed the debates on the European topics. The EP in 2009 was only a preparation for the presidential elections of the same year. Neither in 2007 nor in 2009 was Europe brought closer to the Romanian citizens. The turnout was, according to data supplied by the Central Electoral Bureau, 29.46 % in 2007, 27 % in 2009, 32 % in 2014 [43]. The results reached by the political parties in the polls in 2014 were the following: The Social Democratic Party (SDP) - The Conservative Party (CP)-The National Union for the Progress of Romania (NUPR) – 16 mandates (37.60% of the vote number), National Liberal Party (NLP) - 6 mandates (15%), DLP - 5 mandates (12.23%), DUHG - 2 mandates (6.29%), the Popular Movement Party - 2 mandates (6.21 %) and 1 mandate for the independent candidate - Mircea Diaconu (6.81 %) [C. Dinu, *Rezultate alegeri europarlamentare. Lista câştigătorilor. Cine sunt cei 32 de europarlamentari români*, Gândul, 2014, http://www.gandul.info/alegeri-europarlamentare-rezultate-bec-publica-rezultatele-din-99-99-din-sectii-12650766.html].

In this electoral context, we start from the fact that all EP candidates will follow the slogan which accompanied these elections in the community space, such as *Act, React, Impact* and will get involved in providing information to the citizens in relation to new prerogatives of the EP and in mobilizing them to vote. Candidates have the opportunity to use all the communication tools offered by

the social media. In this article, our attention is focused only on using the blog, as an instrument of electoral communication.

The questions to which our study is trying to answer are the following:

RQ 1 -   What is the ratio of blogging politicians out of the total of those who started the election campaign?

RQ 2 -   Which are the periods, within the campaign, when the activity of the blogging politicians is more intense?

RQ 3 -   To what extent do the blogs of the EP candidates contribute to informing, connecting, involving and mobilizing their visitors?

RQ 4 -   By means of the blogs' content, which image do the candidates reinforce: the personal or the professional?

Initially, the sample for our analysis was made up of the first 32 candidates nominated on the lists of the Romanian parliamentary parties: National Liberal Party (PWN), Liberal Democratic Party (DLP), Social Democratic Party (SDP), the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (DUHG), People's Party-Dan Diaconescu (PP-DD). After displaying the results, noting that the new set-up party, the Popular Movement Party, managed to get two mandates of European MPs, we included in our sample also the first 32 candidates on the list proposed by this party. The final sample consisted in 192 candidates and the research method which we used was content analysis.

The start for the election campaign was given on April 25th, 2014, one month before the date when the EP elections in Romania were supposed to take place. Out of the total of 192 candidates included in the sample, we have identified that only 28 of them had a blog. Out of the 28 blogs, 12 were inactive, i.e. the blog's owner did not post anything during the electoral campaign, and 16 were active, the blogging politicians using them to communicate with the electorate.

As it can be seen in Figure 1, out of the 192 candidates who started the electoral race, only 16 communicated by using their blogs. The blog was used only in a proportion of 8.33 %. The DUHG party has no blogging politician, and the other parties (PMP, PWN, DLP, SDP-CP-NUPR) each had 3 active blogging politicians. The same number of bloggers was also recorded for the independent candidates. This indicates that political actors, related to the online communication, followed a trend already existing in 2011 [16, p. 42], a trend which emphasizes the significant increase of the Facebook network influence, to the detriment of the Romanian blogosphere and blogs.

Practically, the number of the politicians who used their blogs during the EP campaign in 2014 is much smaller than the number of those who used the Facebook network. The novelty is given by the fact that more than a half of those who already held an EP seat and who were reseating for another mandate communicated via Twitter with their prospective voters.

Looking for the answer to the second question of our research, we noticed that the activity of the blogging politicians is not as intense in all cases. As it can be seen in Figure 2, the candidates who used blogs the most were C1 (21 posts), C2 (10 posts), C9 (22 posts), C10 (27 posts) and C14 (43 posts). The two main

candidates, Monica Macovei (DPL) and Marian-Jean Marinescu (DLP), members of the European Parliament with an intense activity during their 2009-2014 mandate, used their blogs to make known their work carried out in the last few years.
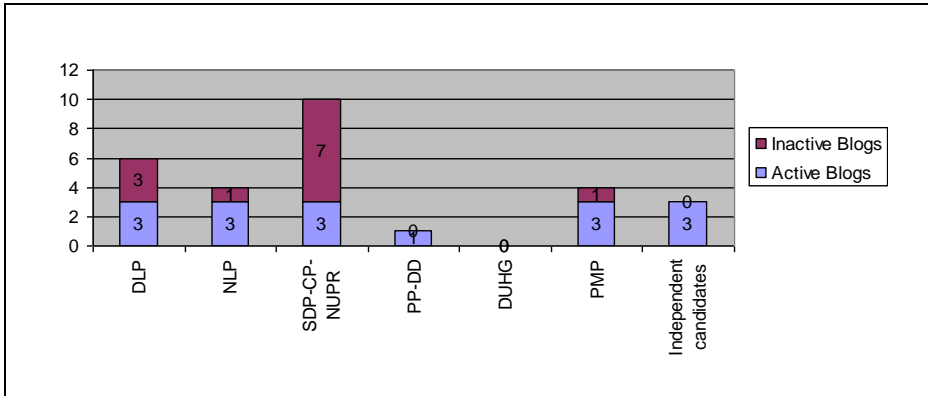
**Figure 1.** Blogs' distribution depending on the politician's party membership.
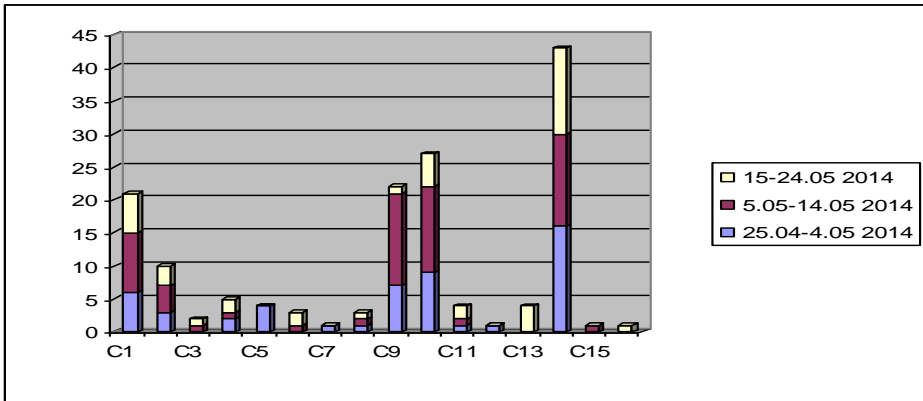
Figure 2. Number of posts on the Romanian EP candidates' blogs during the three stages of the election campaign.

The candidates on the 10th and 14th positions, respectively Simona-Allice Man (PP-DD) and Cristian Preda (PMP), communicated the citizens, by means of their blogs, only the agenda for meetings of the election campaign or that of their appearances in the mass media. The candidate, Laurentiu Rebega (C10, SDP), chose to communicate only by means of his blog and website and offered the interested parties data both on the evolution of the election campaign and on his previous political activity.

In order to see in what part of the election campaign there was a more intense activity on the analysed blogs, we divided the time allotted to the campaign into three distinct periods: initial (April 25th-May 4th, 2014), middle (May 5th–14th, 2014) and final (May 15th-24th, 2014). As shown in Figure 3, most posts on the analysed blogs were recorded in the middle period of the

campaign (61 posts). Unlike the candidates' posts from the first period (51 posts), when there are announcements about the candidacy submission, party list or achievements in (inter)national politics, the posts in the middle period include also analyses about past or future legislative initiatives or the role of the European institutions. The 41 posts in the final stage of the campaign describe an enhancement of the meetings with the electorate and media appearances, confidence in obtaining the citizens' vote or the EP mandate and thanks to the supporters.
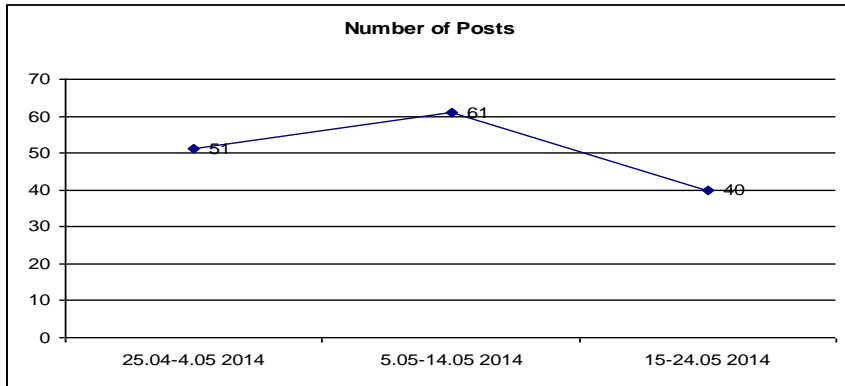

Figure 3. Distribution of posts during the three periods of the electoral campaign.

Before giving the answer to the third question of our research, according to Foot & Schneider [44] and Lilleker et al [33] we offer a brief definition of the four possible functions of a blog: informing, connecting, involving and mobilizing. The practice of information supposes to provide information about the candidate's positions and/or his party's policies toward certain topics and/or problems of topical interest. Candidates turn to blogs and connect with other political actors using hyperlinks, in order to create and consolidate their own networks. Connecting makes the interaction easier online with other users, with social networks (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn) and, in particular, it allows placing a candidate in a specifically cognitive context, making him/her easier to understand in relation to the other competitors. By involving the blog's visitors, the political actor wishes to turn the latter into digitally active participants, activity which can be materialized in creating and posting content on their pages or in their social networks, participating in different surveys, petitions, vote, games or online auction, subscribing to the blog's content, coproducing albums and photos from the events in the campaign. The practice of mobilisation aims at motivating supporters to promote the party's message online or offline using the materials made available to them. Mobilizing supporters leads to their participating in various events during the campaign, post, photo or video sharing, supporting causes as volunteers, having a large number of views or opinions, involving in applying for funds or donations.

The Romanian EP candidates, as it can be seen in Figure 4, were used especially to provide the interested citizens as many pieces of information as possible (79%). Most of the information provided to the citizens aimed at launching candidates, the lists of the names of all colleagues from the political parties who entered the electoral race, the agenda for meetings with the citizens and the media appearances.
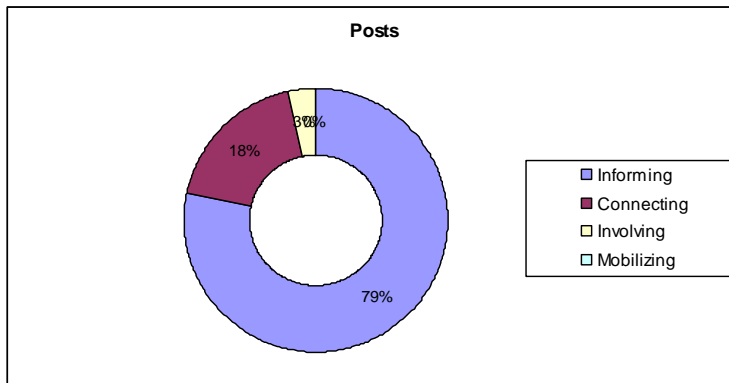
Figure 4. The four functions of the blog in the Romanian candidates' EP election campaign.
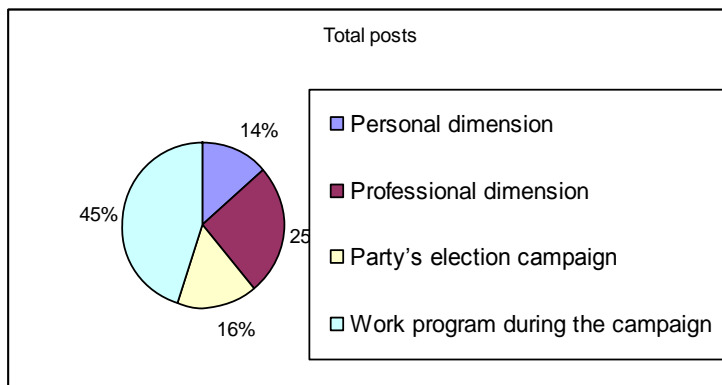
Figure 5. The blogging EP candidate's image.

With only a few exceptions, the candidates who held the position of European MP in the 2009-2014 mandate wrote on their blogs about the European institutions and their powers, about past performances or future projects. The connection function is visibly fulfilled in the case of the blogs of the candidates supported by the political parties and is abandoned by the three independent blogging candidates. Practically, by the existence of the *blog roll section* and *recommended websites*, candidates wanted to show that they are part of a vast social network, a network of party colleagues with high notoriety in the online or offline environment, personalities from the civil society area, journalists or other opinion leaders, the European political family, institutes or

research centres. Most blogs analysed are connected to the best-known social networks (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter). Connecting with the critical voices or the representative voices of the opposition at the national or European level is completely missing. The function of mobilization by means of blogging is abandoned in the case of the analysed blogs and the involvement of the blogs' visitors is carried out extremely low (5%), by inviting them to different online opinion polls or by distributing campaign materials or press releases.

To provide the answer to the last question of this study, we used the content analysis of the 152 posts of the blogging EP candidates. Interested to find out if they consolidate their personal or the professional dimension via blogging, we noticed that many posts could not be classified into the two categories mentioned, so we created two others: the information on the party's election campaign that the candidate belonged to and the announcement of the work program which the candidate made public a few days before, insisting especially on the meetings with the electorate or participation in the different media events (electoral debates, interviews, talk-shows). We have included in the candidate's personal dimension/human side all the data which referred to their skills, behaviours or values required for exercising his/her role of European MP, and in the   professional   dimension   those   which   describe   his/her accomplishments in the political career and not only.

Summarizing all the data on the 16 blogs, we have found out that most posts (45%) had the role to communicate visitors the candidate's program two or three days in advance and 16% of them were simple re-sent information from the party's website with information about the campaign carried out by the latter at the national level (Figure 5).

14% of the number of posts which were included in the category of the candidate's personal dimension were related especially to those statements specific to the (pre)-election period when they motivated their nomination in the electoral race due to their own intellectual and moral qualities necessary for the EP: competence, patriotism, incorruptibility, honesty, perseverance, intelligence, experience gained during the previous mandate, share capital at the European level, support from their own party, close connection to people, awareness of Romanians' problems and Romania. Regarding the candidate's professional dimension, we have seized that they are positioned on extreme positions: some do not provide any information related to their career before and after the date of entry on the political scene (e.g. C3, C5, C7, C10 and C12, C15, although they do not enjoy high notoriety neither in the online nor in the offline environment, and do not provide this information on the social networks), others present too much information about their achievements, allowing an extended space to this category on the blog at the expense of others (for example, C1, C2, C9, all with experience and good results in EP, which write about/describe reports made during their previous mandate). The indicator of the candidate's professional dimension includes 25% of the number of posts analysed.

4. Conclusions

After analysing the blogging candidates listed in the 2014 electoral campaign, we have found that blog, as a communication tool, has lost much of its attraction. Although it coexists in the candidate's communication kit together with his/her website, Facebook or Twitter accounts, the blogging activity is decreasing more and more. In the EP election campaign, in the online environment, the one that has won both the candidates' and the citizen' attention seems to be the Facebook. Here, citizens interested in the candidate's performance can follow the messages posted on the network without any efforts, and the candidate shares, at the same time to all his / her listed friends, photos, mini-movies or short texts hoping that they will become viral and/or will receive a large number of likes.

In the EP election campaign, the blogging candidates represented 8.33% of the total number of those who joined the electoral race. The analysed blogs were part of web 1.0 era, all operating only as *bulletin boards/wall newspapers* where the visitor could read, on a case-by-case basis, announcements/messages about the launching of the candidacy and the candidate's CV, previous activity in EP, the agenda for meetings with the citizens or media appearances. Most messages were posted in the middle of the election campaign and meant to inform visitors (79 %) or show them how well the blog's owner is connected to the Romanian or European political - civic network (18%). The involvement of blogs' visitors (5%) implies only inviting them to different online surveys and distributing election material and their mobilization in different online or offline activities is abandoned. It seems that the activity of building/consolidating the public image is a challenging one by blogging, only 39% of the total posts are connected to the blogging candidate' s personal or professional dimension.

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