European Review, Vol. 28, No. 5, 778–792 © Academia Europaea 2020
doi:10.1017/S106279872000023X

Explaining Change: The Online Political Marketing of the Romanian Social Democrats

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In the most recent two decades, the political campaigns conducted by the Social Democratic Party in Romania targeted specific groups of voters, with little intention to attract new voters. The reason behind their strategy is that they could secure a relatively constant support of roughly one third of the electorate and so win the popular vote in every election since 2000. However, the 2016 parliamentary elections marked a turning point in this approach and the party used almost exclusively online marketing to organize, streamline and channel its messages. This article seeks to understand why this change occurred although it did not seem to be necessary. This change is more surprising in a context in which the main political competitors were weak and disorganized. Our qualitative analysis aims to identify and explain the main elements that determined this change. It accounts for three main variables: experiential learning, the role of a new party leader and the use of new opportunities.

Introduction

In the first two decades of post-communism, the Romanian political parties used classic campaign strategies aimed at mobilizing the loyal electorate and at convincing the undecided voters to support them (Bíró-Nagy *et al.* 2016; Vintila and Soare 2018). Electoral campaigns were centrally coordinated and involved two main channels: the use of resources at the local level, including clientelism and intimidation (Gherghina 2013; Gherghina and Volintiru 2017; Mares *et al.* 2018) and the use of traditional media (Gross 2015; Stan and Vancea 2015). In a political system with relatively high levels of electoral volatility (Emanuele *et al.* 2018; Sikk 2005), the Romanian Social Democratic Party (PSD) employed these two avenues to maintain a highly stable electoral support in four consecutive elections between 2000 and 2012 (Gherghina 2014). In these elections, the average of support was slightly higher than one third of the valid votes that were cast, winning all the parliamentary elections.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279872000023X Published online by Cambridge University Press

In spite of these achievements, in 2016 the party altered dramatically its approach to electoral campaigns by heavily using the social media. The two classic avenues were used to a much less extent than before and this raises some questions. Earlier research showed that changes in strategies are usually due to limitations of available resources or to the necessity to convey a clear positioning of the political competitor (Bannon 2005). It could also be due to aiming at new voters whose political choices are not specifically defined (Green *et al.* 2002). The PSD did not have in 2016 fewer resources than before, it succeeded on many occasions in the past to convey a clear message, and appealed to some of the young voters also in the past. As such, it is unclear why this change towards campaign marketing occurred in 2016 when the classic strategies used in the past elections functioned and provided a positive outcome, and when none of the above outlined challenges were present.

This article seeks to address this puzzle and aims to explain the transformation of the PSD's political strategy. The research question guiding our analysis is: why did these changes in strategy and approach occur when everything worked well? In our quest for an answer we employ a theoretical framework that is based on the institutional theory (Dacin *et al.* 2002), institutional change theory (Mahony and Thelen 2010) and on the perspectives related to the 'new' institutionalism (March and Olsen 1984). To achieve this goal, our research is based on analysis of the statistical documents and official reports, as well as on direct observation of the previous political campaigns. We focus on how social media tools were used (the scope, the amplitude, the content and the results) and how the programme was changed (the format and content) in a comparative manner with the 2016 local elections, and the 2014 European elections and presidential elections.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The first section reviews the literature about party behaviour and the theories of change. The second section presents the research design and an overview of the 2016 parliamentary elections campaign. Finally, we analyse the motivations and the factors identified in the case of the PSD.

Changes in Electoral Marketing: An Institutional Approach

Candidates and parties adopt new instruments and tools to reach voters effectively and efficiently (Lees-Marshment 2009). For example, in 2004, Viktor Yushchenko chose a different strategy, based on direct interactions with his supporters, by organizing rallies all around Ukraine as a form of uncensored communication and promoting a different political programme, which brought him victory in the presidential elections (Shusko and Lisnychuk 2015). In 2007, Maxine McKew won the federal seat of Bannelong in Sydney after a highly personalized and professionalized campaign (Watt 2010). The internet has gradually increased in importance and became a central element for election campaign strategies in the United States (Smith 2009; Taylor and Kent 2004), the United Kingdom, France, Germany (Lilleker and Jackson 2011), Italy (Vaccari 2013), India (Pande 2014), Czech Republic (Gregor

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279872000023X Published online by Cambridge University Press

and Matušková 2014). There were some attempts to make use of Web 2.0 in political communication in the United States, but only Obama`s campaign of 2008 gained significant attention used the internet as a useful tool (Karan *et al.* 2008). The model was adopted by West European countries and attempts at implementing the digital strategy were observed in several countries (Karan *et al.* 2008): Spain and Norway (Cervi and Roca 2017) or Indonesia (Irawanto 2019).

Factors that may produce changes in electoral marketing could be identified in a deeper context observed by the institutional perspective. Institutions and organizations are often characterized by resistance to change or have often failed to effectively respond to change initiatives (Gross and Giacquinta 1971; Nelson and Yates 1978). Political institutions not only respond to the environment, but create those environments (Olsen and March 1989). Even if they provide fundamental elements of order in politics, political institutions change in two ways: a mundane, incremental transformation of everyday life and an exogenous one determined by sudden variations in society (Olsen and March 1989). Also, politics is oriented towards experimentation (Wolin 1961) and organizations do not always have a well-defined set of objectives and the preferences are affected by their choices (Elster 1979; March 1978).

As a result, the processes of problem solving and decision making assume some of the features of the 'garbage can' model processes (Cohen *et al.* 1972), while learning becomes confounded by the vagueness of experience (Cohen *et al.* 1972; March *et al.* 1976), a case in which change is a matter of inertia. At the same time, most changes in organization are just simple reactions to demographic, social, political or economic forces (March 1981) but they rarely occur in a way that fulfils the intentions of a particular group of actors (Attewell and Gerstein 1979; Crozier 1979). March (1981) identifies six basic perspectives for interpreting organizational action: rule following, problem solving (Cyert and March 1963; Lindblom 1959), learning (experiential learning, Winter 1975), conflict resulted (changes result from shifts in the mobilization of those involved or in the controlled resources, March 1981; Pfeffer 1981), contagion (Walker 1969) or regeneration (Lounsbury and Ventresca 2003). Harmel and Janda (1994) connect the political parties' change to three factors: leadership change, change in dominant factions and external stimuli (environmental changes). In addition, change is explained through the fact that organizations scan for solutions rather than problems, and they tend to match any solution to a relevant issue (March 1981). But change is also driven by success and organizational behaviour is motivated by a sense of competence and confidence that change is possible, natural and applicable (Daft and Becker 1978). Considering the experiential learning, March and Olsen (1984) explain the change by emphasizing three elements that will lead to approach transformation: the change of strategy (March *et al.* 1976), the change of competences and the change of aspirations (Cyert and March 1963).

The sociological institutionalism considers the institutions as non-codified, informal conventions and collective scripts that are built in order to regulate the human behaviour. The literature emphasizes the self-reproductive properties, with institutionalized structures having a tendency to be relatively inert, presenting significant efforts to resist change (Jepperson 1991). Jepperson (1991) argues that institutions are,

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actually, social patterns that, when chronically reproduced, owe their survival to self-activating processes. In this regard, March and Olsen consider that institutions are dynamic entities that are learning to follow the codes of appropriateness. So, in this rhetoric, if we are to refer to political parties, they are always looking for an institutional equilibrium, where the expectations are stabilized and the enforcement is internal (North 1990).

Katz and Kahn (1978) discuss the elements preventing organizations from adjusting to the environment and identify several inhibiting factors: individual and group inertia, threats to established power systems and threats related to those who profit from the existing allocation of rewards. Hall (1975) concludes that organizations are conservative by their nature and Huse and Cummings (1989) emphasize that organizations must experience or anticipate a severe threat to survival before they will be motivated enough to undertake transformational change. Kimberly and Quinn (1984, p. 139) argue that massive changes in strategy 'can be precipitated by a variety of factors such as declines in performance, perceptions of new opportunities, changes in legislation, or the development of new technologies'.

Three Drivers of Campaign Change

For political parties, change might occur under the pressure represented by 'an organizational crisis unleashed by strong environmental pressure. Electoral defeat and deterioration in terms of exchange in the electoral arena are classic types of external challenges which exert very strong pressure on the party' (Panebianco 1988, p. 243). Political parties respond to environmental incentives such as mean voter change, party voter change and electoral defeat or to changes in economic conditions (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009). Political parties actively respond to these changes by adapting their political message and strategies as part of a broader process of experiential learning. Kedrowski and Moyon (2017) discuss the experiential learning in the context of organizing campaigning in a different context, which forces the strategy to change. Ezrow *et al*. (2011) show that different types of parties respond differently. For example, mainstream parties react more efficiently to positioning transformations of different types of voters, while niche parties are more responsive to position shifts of their already loyal voters. Budge (1994) illustrates how a political party can shift its strategy in order to safeguard or advance within the political system and this by responding to past electoral results.

Another factor that can contribute to a major change in campaigning is social media. In recent decades, new communication tools have changed the way campaigning is organized. The new sources gave voters the possibility to tailor their media consumption in order to satisfy individual preferences (Brown *et al.* 2012; Stroud 2011). Campaign strategists had to adapt and to develop more advanced methods of targeting (Hendricks and Schill 2014; Hillygus and Shields 2009), while profiling the political message in such a way that the efficiency of the new communication tools are maximized. The low barrier to entry allows more voters in diverse constituencies to participate, while video sharing platforms converged with television

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in elections as they both host campaigning ads, making the political message easier to distribute (Burgess *et al.* 2013).

The transformation of political strategies and the way campaigning is conducted and organized is not a process that occurs very often and fast. This happens because campaign strategy is designed to be fixed and all variables anticipated (Nelson and Thurber 1995; Shea and Burton 2001). The strategy should change only when there is 'clear, irrefutable evidence that what you are doing is not working because the fundamental circumstances in which the race is being conducted have changed' (Nelson and Thurber 1995; Shea and Burton 2001, p. 173). In this sense, some scholars refer to the role of leadership in change. Sikk and Köker (2019) show that a new leader always bring a degree of novelty, especially when elected after an electoral defeat. Other scholars refer to the *Americanization* of election campaigns in a series of countries (Cervi and Roca 2017); the *personalization* of politics, which means the rise in importance of the leaders and the candidates (Adam and Maier 2010; McAllister 2007); the *scientification* of political campaigns through the involvement of specialized pollsters (Hellstrom and Jacob 2000); and the growing development of the *autonomous structures of communication* represented by the new media. The latter proved a crucial determinant for the change of electoral marketing through the general use of the internet and the particular use of social media (Towner and Dulio 2011). Digital media were incorporated into political communication for three main reasons: speed, versatility and the fact that political communication is no longer just a top-down process but a horizontal and a bottom-up one (Brants and Voltmer 2011).

These arguments provide a useful avenue to understand the change of the PSD campaign. The empirical sections of this article will investigate to what extent this change was driven by mimetism or experiential learning (the defeat suffered in the presidential elections of 2014), the leadership change and the development of new technologies.

Research Design and Overview of the 2016 Parliamentary Elections

This paper seeks to explain the change in the electoral marketing of political parties, by focusing on the PSD in Romania and on its political campaign in the 2016 parliamentary elections. Between 2014 and 2016 the political marketing on the Romanian political scene has undergone significant transformations, such as streamlined political message delivery, the attempt to integrate new audiences and the use of online campaigning. The PSD won the parliamentary elections in 2012 as well as in 2000 and 2004, and in 2008 it was part of the ruling coalition, which demonstrates that the campaign strategy was functional. However, in the 2016 local and parliamentary elections the campaign strategy was different. To explain these changes in the way the campaign was organized and implemented, we use document analysis (official reports) with an emphasis on two main aspects: the structure of the political programme and the use of social media. We analyse two Facebook pages – that of

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the political leader and the official party profile – and an online platform where video testimonials were published. Moreover, the main ways of delivering the political message – texts, images and videos – were systematically analysed for the last 90 days before de election, starting with 2 September 2016.

The 2016 Parliamentary Election

The 2016 parliamentary election marked a return to the closed-list proportional representation that was abandoned in 2008 (Chiru and Ciobanu 2009; Gherghina and Jiglau 2012). Moreover, the political scene for the 2016 elections was different because the political campaigns had to be organized under a new electoral law. The new provisions were challenging, having in mind the old way campaigning was done. It was forbidden to use and distribute electoral materials, such as pens, clothing, flashlights, buckets, etc., and public shows, celebrations and fireworks with a political purpose were not allowed. Banners, mobile billboards, advertising screens, light advertising and vehicle advertising were also banned. More than this, the posters had to be smaller than those in other campaigns – at most 50 cm by 35 cm – and they had to be displayed only in designated places established by the mayor`s order. In addition, the electoral posters combining colours or other graphics signs that can evoke or suggests national symbols of Romania were denied (Law 115/2015 and Law 208/2015, Law 113/2015).

These elections took place in a special context: since November 2015 the country had a technocratic cabinet that started its term in office after the resignation of the PSD-led government. The Prime Minister resigned when facing street protests in the aftermath of the tragedy at the 'Collective' club. The Social Liberal Union (USL), the alliance formed of the PSD and the Liberals, which won almost 60% of the votes in 2012, disintegrated and the Liberals (PNL) joined forces with the third political party of the country (Liberal Democrats) in the attempt to defeat the PSD. In addition, there were major regroupings. After PNL dropped from USL and was later admitted as a full member of the European People`s Party (EPP), it suffered an internal split. A group of politicians that gathered around Călin Popescu Tăriceanu left PNL and formed the Liberal Reformist Party (PLR) which later merged with Conservative Party and became the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE). After that, PNL joined forces with PDL (Democratic Liberal Party), which also suffered a fracture – former president Traian Basescu left and formed the People`s Movement Party (PMP). An unpredictable element for these elections is represented by Union for the Salvation of Romania (USR), founded in 2015 by Nicuşor Dan. The party was based on the success of the Save Bucharest Union in the 2016 local elections and it is a political formation that supports the anti-corruption movement in Romania. In 2016, the party got 8.87% from the votes, being the third party in the Romanian Parliament (data gathered through National Electoral Bureau, 2016).

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Why and how PSD Changed its Strategy?

As noted by Ban (2016),

> the Social Democrats are one of the region's most resilient and effective political formations. Critically, the institutional infrastructure of the PSD remains highly competitive: the top of the party hierarchy has real authority and its reach on the ground has no counterpart. This comes with the usual pork barrel politics feeding the party-municipal government networks and their known neo-patrimonial pathologies, but a third of the country still lives and votes in villages and, come election time, it is a huge asset to have these local party institutions.

As such, it is unclear why this change in approach towards campaign marketing occurred in 2016 when the classic strategies used in past elections functioned and provided a positive outcome. The following sections reflect on the three elements that could have been the driving factors for this change.

Experiential Learning

As shown above, learning from previous experiences can be rooted in the PSD's failure in the 2014 presidential elections. In those elections, social media played an important role and influenced in a consistent way the results (Androniciuc 2016; Patrut 2014). Klaus Iohannis won the elections by using the same pattern of communication as Obama (Vaccari 2013) and his political campaign reached voters who were disinterested in elections in general. Even if the PSD candidate at the time had had a Facebook page since 2010, and Iohannis only got his own in May 2014, the winner still recorded a better effectiveness of message delivery. The rise of Iohannis` popularity through social media might have been a very good lesson for PSD, and the changes identified in the following campaigns organized by the social democrats could come from that moment.

In addition, the PSD used in 2016 a new communication tool. The message was delivered mostly through Facebook, and the strategy was very well planned. There were three elements that have been remarked: the Facebook (FB) profile of the party`s leader – Liviu Dragnea – the PSD official page on the same platform and the website, www.indraznestesacrezi.ro. With these instruments, PSD dominated the online environment during the campaign period. An overall analysis provides the following parameters for the campaigning conducted using the social media tools. When compared with the pages of the other three main political competitors, PNL, USR and PMP (People's Movement Party), the PSD has a clear advantage. The total number of FB posts in the electoral campaign was, out of 904 messages, 373 (41%) belonged to the PSD, 168 (19%) the PNL, 204 (23%) to the USR and 159 (18%) to the PMP.

The media content promoted via Facebook was fairly equally distributed among competitors. Out of a total of 491 uploads, the PNL had 29%, while the PSD had 22% but with an extensive promotion of video content through the website, www.indraznestesacrezi.ro. On that website, 523 videos received from party supporters were uploaded and shared on various Facebook pages. Moreover, the PSD had

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the official page of the party to which each local and regional branch used their own pages to promote the political message at the local level. The USR published 126 posts having photos or videos, representing 26% of the total, while the PMP tried to reach the voters through 115 multimedia messages. Simple text messages and statuses have been extensively used by PSD. Out of the 240 entries in that time frame, 205 belonged to the PSD. The PNL had only five interventions, the USR 23 and the PMP seven.

While almost all parties had a second page about the leader, the content overlap between the official page and the leader`s profile differs. The PSD used both pages to promote the programme and the party`s supporters (through videos), making it easier for the voters to identify themselves with the broader community. A total of 335 messages and multimedia content was shared both on the official page and on the profile page of Dragnea. None of them was about the individuals but about the programme, the political product, the community, and all of them were designed to motivate supporters to vote. The party integrated both pages with the website indraznestesacrezi.ro, dominating the online environment. In contrast, the PNL had 88 posts (out of 168) on the leader`s page and the USR had 105 posts (out of 204) delivered through the leader's page. The videos of the PSD were shared extensively and even though the users did not land on the official pages, they interacted in one way or another with the promoted message. In many ways, a 'share' is even better than a 'Like' because it represents a stronger social endorsement and is far more likely to get noticed in the newsfeed of the friends of the person who has shared. Sharing means that supporters proactively tell the world about the content.

All these points indicate that the PSD dominated the online environment both qualitatively and quantitatively, reaching more people and attracting new supporters. It was a greater level of integration of social media tools used by the PSD, compared with the 2012 elections. The message generated at the national level was distributed predominantly through the party leader's page, and was taken over by local organizations and disseminated among the supporters. The overall impression was that of coordination and integrated efforts. Even those who were not advanced users of the Facebook platform were able to interact with the promoted media content.

Moreover, the PSD learned that social-media platforms fragment the virtual space and, by this, the candidates can isolate themselves according to their ideology/programme. In 2016, it changed the message and the content (without emphasizing the leader, but the programme) in a way that facilitated the use of FB as a political marketing instrument, rather than an environment for debate (Momoc 2011). If, in 2012 (during the second Romanian presidential impeachment referendum), the online environment became a fighting arena between the supporters and opponents of the president in office (Patrut 2014), in 2016 the PSD learned that an ideological conflict is not necessary. It kept the campaign free of mudslinging. The PSD had another example, represented by the campaign for Iohannis in 2014, which was positive and aimed at reaching the young voters (Mihalache and Huiu 2015).

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The Change of Leadership

Regarding the leadership, in 2016 the president of the party was Dragnea. He was elected in 2015 after the former leader, Victor Ponta, resigned after accusations of corruption. With this change of leadership, a change in dominant faction also occurred. It was facilitated by the exclusion of several influential members who could be opponents for the new president. When Dragnea became party leader he had no credible opponent, i.e. he was the only candidate running for that position. He was head of campaign for the PSD during the European Parliament elections in 2007 and coordinator for the parliamentary elections of 2008. In 2015, he got 97% of the votes to be executive president of the PSD and, under his coordination, the political campaign was developed following the advice of two Israeli campaigning strategists – Moshe Klughaft and Sefi Shaked – and was similar with the one used by Mitt Romney in his 2012 presidential race ('Believe in America') (Freedland 2012). Moshe Klughaft also worked for Bayit Yehudi (the ultra-Orthodox Jewish party from Israel) and was the mind behind a protest by the military reserve after the 2006 Lebanon war that helped the party return to power. He also worked closely with former Israeli President, Shimon Peres. The other consultant, Shaked, worked on the campaigns of Israeli PM, Benjamin Netanyahu, and Shas Party leader, Aryeh Deri. Their main objective was to change the image of PSD into a 'younger and patriotic' alternative (Hoffman 2016).

In this context, with his previous experience and supported by a large number of party member, the new leader strived to change the strategy and aimed for better political results as he declared: 'I will have no hesitation, because PSD should not and cannot miss the opportunity to become the first modern Romanian party' (Neagu 2016).

The Perception of New Opportunities

With all these strategies, in the local elections of 2016, organized half a year before the legislative election, the PSD won with minimal effort. This happened because, at least in the rural areas, the chances to lose seats were limited and, in most cases, the politicians were not running for the first time. In the national elections the strategy was different. The political campaign was based on a larger strategy that emerged in the 2014 elections for the European Parliament. Then, the central message was based on two key phrases: 'Proud to be Romanian' and 'Romania – strong in Europe'. These nationalist approaches were complemented by traditional symbols and were used to send a strong message to voters. More than this, the other parties had a weaker approach: the PNL tried to get votes by using slogans as 'Support the EuroChampions' or 'EuroChampions to deeds', while the PMP used 'The movement makes the change. We raise Romania'. Even if the photos used by the PSD for the banners and other outdoor advertising elements were bought from a specialized website (shutterstock.com) and they were from Belarus or Poland, the scandal did not affect significantly the rate of electoral support (R.M. 2014). The PSD used the nationalist approach, starting in 2014. The main political message was 'Dare to

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believe in Romania', even if after few days the idea promoted by PNL was almost similar: 'Dare to believe in Romania led by honest people'. Even though the electoral law explicitly denied the right to use graphic elements that can be assimilated to national symbols, the PSD used in almost all graphic designs the three colours of the Romanian flag: red, yellow and blue.

In 2016, the PSD was a programme-oriented party (Gherghina and Chiru 2018b). Regarding the programme, this was designed to fit 'like a glove' the elements generating insecurity within the majority of the voters and presented above. The PSD promoted a more developed middle class, bigger wages, fair pensions, better medical services and an improved educational system. In addition, they promised the elimination of 102 non-fiscal taxes, alongside greater support for local farmers, reindustrialization and well-paid jobs in strong Romanian companies. Overall, the programme is characterized by a nationalist approach and is based on a multitude of economic figures and deadlines. Also, it leaves the impression that it is elaborated based on very realistic analyses and gives the feeling of feasibility.

More than this, it addresses problems that occur in several categories of voters: young voters, retired workers, entrepreneurs, as also farmers. The party proposes salary and pension increases to maintain credibility within the traditional sympathetic group and adds a dose of nationalism through the idea of re-industrialization and the Sovereign Investment Fund, whose role is unclear but should have a significant economic impact.

At the same time, tax reduction, 18% VAT and tax cuts are an attempt to attract an audience that is traditionally associated with the PNL and perhaps even those who are attracted by the anti-system rhetoric promoted by the Save Romania Union (USR). Also, the manifesto stands out through its size – 9029 words, compared with PNL`s manifesto which has 3400 words (Gherghina and Chiru 2018a), and in which, despite its length, there are no mentions of corruption reduction, administrative reform, poverty reduction, minorities' rights, foreign policy, inflation rate, etc. Overall, the message was clear, concise and focused on the economic welfare the political programme will bring. Moreover, the idea of efficiency and responsibility was promoted. Figures were the central element, and they all conveyed that citizens would have more money in their pockets. One initiative was to involve the electorate by inviting them to keep the campaign newspaper in order to mark the moments when the political commitments were implemented.

The PSD was riddled by major integrity issues, but its programme was in accordance with its behaviour from 2012 when it acted as an anti-austerity party; this remained their most important message. In the minds of the voters there is a difference between the political parties who 'took from us' and those that 'gave us'. The latter is often associated with the PSD, and this because, for example, between 2012 and 2015 the party negotiated with its political partners to increase the minimum wage several times and cut VAT for medicine.

Above everything, the PSD took advantage of the weak political opposition. The PNL was hesitant to fight back and, during the entire campaign, it did not promote a name for the future prime minister. In the end, the PNL chose Dacian Cioloş, the

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technocrat prime minister at the time, who refused to enrol in the party and to run for a parliamentary seat on behalf of PNL. The USR also declared its support for Cioloş. Consequently, the main political rivals were weak, undecided and failed to convey a credible position and message.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to explain why change occurred in the electoral campaign of the most successful political party in Romania. In 2016, unlike in previous elections, the party used, almost exclusively, online marketing to organize, streamline and channel its messages. This change of strategy was somewhat surprising for a party that has a stable electorate and had not suffered any electoral defeat since 2000. Three factors were identified as potential drivers for this change: experiential learning or mimetism, the leadership change and the perception of new opportunities. Thus, in the case of PSD, the three elements worked together and overlapped, resulting in consistent success in the 2016 parliamentary elections. The Social Democrats learned from the experience of the presidential elections in 2014, took advantage of the foundations then made by using social media as a secondary tool, and the new leadership exploited the fragility of the main political competitors.

The implications of this study go beyond the single case analysed here. At theoretical level, the analysis reveals the explanatory potential of the institutional change theory when applied to strategies used in electoral campaigns. The new approach used by the PSD in the 2016 election in Romania rests on a combination of institutional factors that can form the basis for further investigations. Empirically, the results highlight the importance of both organizational components – such as the leadership – and external elements such as the learning process and the identification of new opportunities. As the results are not case specific, these observations open the door to a broad variety of comparisons with other countries from the region.

Building on this, further research can follow two general directions. One avenue could be the attempt to identify and asses the presence of other factors leading to the campaign change, in addition to those analysed here. One such example could be the change in the composition of the voting age population, e.g. the inclination to new technologies could be due to a large cohort of young people entering the electorate. Another direction could focus on the comparisons with other established parties from Central and Eastern Europe. The PSD is one of the most stable political actors, with a continuous presence on the political arena. It has an important organizational legacy – since it is a successor party – and relevant comparisons can be made with similar parties in the region or with the newly emerged ones that choose to alter their electoral strategies on a continuous basis.

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