ASSESSING LESSONS LEARNED: INSIGHTS FROM THE 2019 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS COVERAGE IN BULGARIAN ONLINE MEDIA

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Abstract

In 2024, Bulgarians participated for the fifth time in electing their representatives to the European Parliament. Unlike the general trend observed across the EU, which indicates higher voter turnout, Bulgaria has maintained a relatively stable turnout rate across its last three European elections.

The role of media content in shaping the public agenda is substantial, as it highlights current and significant topics. While media alone cannot guarantee the impact of the issues they cover, it plays a crucial role in establishing an agenda and framing public interest. Thus, media significantly influences audience perceptions and attitudes towards particular issues or events. This role of the media as gatekeepers of information becomes even more critical during election campaigns. However, it remains questionable whether online media in Bulgaria provides sufficient information to enable citizens to make informed choices about their European Parliament representatives.

This paper presents findings from a 2019 study analysing the online media coverage of the 2019 European Parliament election campaign in Bulgaria and compares these findings with a similar study conducted in 2024. The primary hypothesis posits that only a few lessons have been learned from previous European Parliament election campaigns, which impedes citizens' ability to be adequately informed about EU agenda topics and to elect representatives who will effectively advocate for their rights and interests.

Keywords: European election, online media, media coverage, 2019, 2024

Introduction

Between 6-9 June 2024 the Elections for Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) were held in 27 Member States of the European Union (EU). This

was the fifth time since 2007 when Bulgaria became one of the EU Member States and the Bulgarians have the right to vote in the European elections . In 2024, for a second consecutive time over 50 percent of EU citizens voted in the European parliamentary elections[1]. This year the turnout reached the highest voter turnout since 1994, when it was 56 percent. Based on the data provided by the Central Election Commission, 32.57% of eligible Bulgarian voters participated in the European Parliament elections in May 2019, while this figure was 33.78% in 2024[2]. Despite this, the number of voters was higher in 2019 by 21 845, due to a decrease in the number of eligible voters over the five years following the latest census in the country. Consequently, it can be concluded that there has been no significant change in voter turnout between the last two European Parliament elections in Bulgaria, but the country does not follow the general trend for higher turnout in the EU.

The media content largely shapes the public agenda on current and important topics.[3] This thesis is based on the fact that the media cannot independently guarantee the effect of the topics and events they cover in their publications, but they can set an agenda of issues, thereby framing public interest and consequently having a significant influence on the audience's perception and attitude towards a given problem or event. Given this, the role of the media as gatekeepers of information is even more significant during an election campaign. Therefore, analysing the media and tracking whether they present the facts about elections such as those for the Members of the European Parliament (EP) objectively enough is indicative of the functioning of a democratic society.

According to the 2019 Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism report on the news in the digital environment, 88% of Internet users in Bulgaria use online news sources, including social media, highlighting the great importance of online news content in shaping public opinion[4].

This is why the paper is focusing of the content shaping the 2019 EP election campaign in the online media in Bulgaria and is trying to answer the question are the lessons learned if we compare the online coverage in 2019 and in 2024. The main data presented in this report are from a study conducted in 2019 and published in Bulgarian in 2022, titled „The 2019 European Elections in the Content of Bulgarian Online Media".[5] The conducted research was carried

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[1] Official website of the European parliament (2024) 2024 European election results. Available at: https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/index.html

[2] Official site of the Central Election Commission in Bulgaria, Available at: https://results.cik.bg/europe2024/aktivnost/index.html

[3] Mccombs. M. & Shaw, D. (1972) *The Agenda - Setting Function of Mass Media*, Oxford University Press.

[4] Nic Newman et al. (2019) *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019*. University of Oxford, 2019. Available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/inline-files/DNR_2019_FINAL.pdf.

[5] Юрукова, М. (2022) *Европейските избори през 2019 г. в съдържанието на българските онлайн медии*. В: Изборите за ЕП през 2019 г. Отразяване в българските онлайн медии. София: Университетско издателство СУ „Св. Климент Охридски", с. 20-62.

out by a team with expertise in the field of media policies and studies including students from the Department of European Studies at the Faculty of Philosophy in Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski"[6]. The methodology is based on media content analysis, a method frequently used in the fields of public relations and mass communications, because the quantitative content analysis is useful for analysing media content, such as topics or issues, the volume of mentions, and messages[7]. For the analysis of internet or online media, a tool was developed comprising 19 questions with a total of 164 possible responses. This tool was used to code 2,259 communication units[8]. The period for the data collection was from 6 to 26 May 2019. Other research methodologies applied within the study include general scientific methods such as synthesis and comparative analysis of public information. The main limitations and specificities associated with the analysis of online media content related to the 2019 European Parliament elections in Bulgaria are further outlined and systematized in a separate academic publication.[9,10] The same study for the 2024 elections is currently in the process of data collection and the comparison made in this report are not based on the data, but on the main tendencies observed so far during the process of analyses.

Informative Value of the Content in the Bulgarian Online Media during the 2019th EP Election Campaign

The content provided by Bulgarian online media in 2019 predominantly serves an informational purpose, but its nature is mainly general informative (*Figure 1*).

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[6] Юрукова, М. (2022) *Европейските избори през 2019 г. в съдържанието на българските онлайн медии.* В: Изборите за ЕП през 2019 г. Отразяване в българските онлайн медии. София: Университетско издателство СУ „Св. Климент Охридски", с. 20-62.

[7] Macnamara, J. (2025) Media content analysis: Its uses; benefits and best practice methodology. In: Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal, 6(1), 1-34.

[8] The scope of the content analysis in 2019 includes 34 websites of media and online media outlets news.bnt.bg, bnr.bg, vesti.bg, blitz.bg, nova.bg dnes.bg, bradva.bg, 24chasa.bg, dnevnik.bg, fakti.bg, offnews.bg, dariknews.bg, pik.bg, webcafe.bg, news.bg, frognews.bg, btvnovinite.bg, novini.bg, mediapool.bg, segabg.com, clubz.bg, actualno.com, capital.bg, trud.bg, epicenter.bg, glasove.com, monitor.bg, svobodnaevropa.bg, standartnews.com, bgonair.bg, kanal3.bg, lentata.com, terminal3.bg и tvevropa.com. The study focuses on the media content generated by public media, with particular emphasis on the official news websites of BNT and BNR (bntnews.bg and bnr.bg). The two primary criteria for selection were popularity in Bulgaria and the presence of news content on the websites. This group includes online editions of both traditional and new media within the Bulgarian media market, specifically the official websites of public and commercial media outlets-televisions, radios, print media, and entirely online news sites.

[9] Юрукова, М., И. Иванова, Б. Ангелов (2020) *Европейски избори през 2019: ограничения в анализа на медийното съдържание онлайн в България.* В: Сборник с доклади от VII международна конференция на катедра „Европеистика", СУ. София: Минерва, с.196-218.

[10] Юрукова, М. (2022) *Европейските избори през 2019 г. в съдържанието на българските онлайн медии.* В: Изборите за ЕП през 2019 г. Отразяване в българските онлайн медии. София: Университетско издателство СУ „Св. Климент Охридски", с. 20-62.
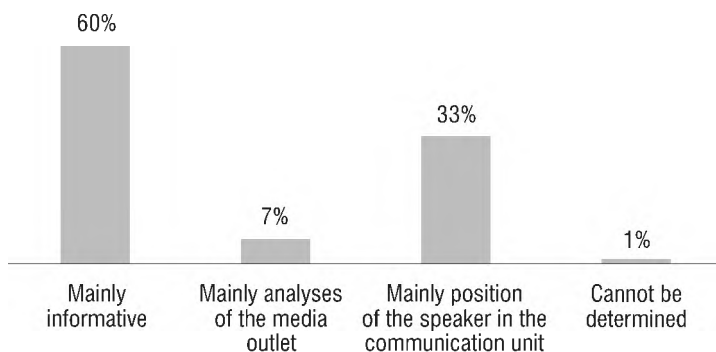
Figure 1. Informative Value
(% of the total number of analysed communication units)

One-third of the publications within the scope of the study primarily convey or present the positions, opinions, or evaluations of others outside the media, often involving statements from specific politicians. Few analytical materials are prepared by online media for their audience. In the specific case of the European elections, this trend turns the media into a kind of platform without commentary but also as an amplifier of politicians' actions and positions. This is due to the lack of context and additional information being sought and analysed. This leads to the transfer of some media functions as setting the agenda of the society to politicians and political parties in terms of forming an impartial and independent agenda that serves the public interest rather than specific political interests. This trend intensified in 2024, as shown by the data from the same study conducted for the 2024 elections, which is currently in the process of publication.

Authorship and Cited Sources

The identification of the author and the ownership of the media outlet is significantly important to media content consumers. Firstly, it clarifies who is speaking. Secondly, it contributes to the accountability and responsibility of the media to its audience.
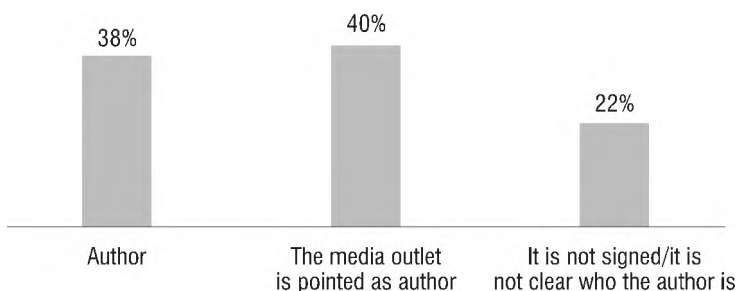

Figure 2. Authorship
(% of the total number of analysed communication units)

The findings regarding the authorship of the communication units raise concerns about the lack of responsibility, as over one-fifth have no specified author, leaving the audience unclear about who is communicating with them (Figure 2).

Another prominent trend is that the authors of the publications hide behind the general formulation that the media outlet itself is the author. This lesson looks like it was learned because at least at the observation level on the content for the EP elections in the online media in Bulgaria it looks like the cases of non-signed publications is decreasing compared to 2024 which is one of the positive tendencies.
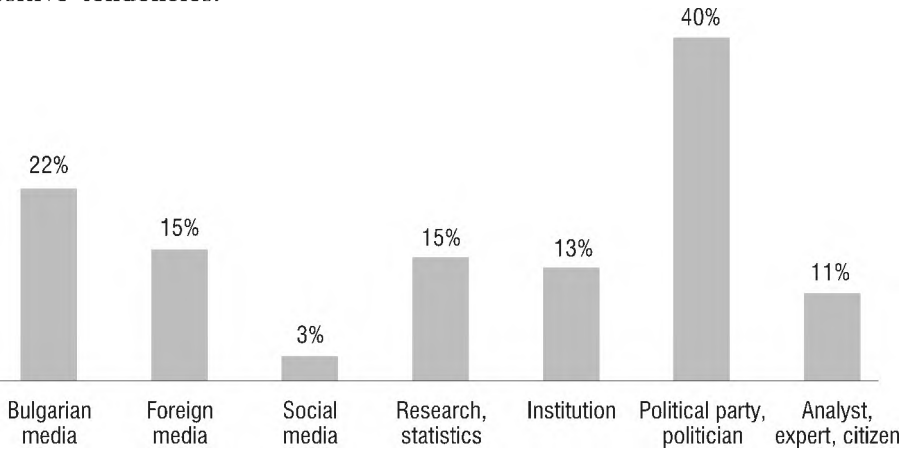

Figure 3. Sources Referenced by Online Media
(% of the total number of analysed communication units)

In approximately one-tenth of the communication units, there is no reference for the source of information by the media. Bulgarian online media most frequently cite politicians in their publications related to the coverage of the pre-election campaign for MEPs (Figure 3). Given the topic, this is expected, but the model of merely reporting what politicians say is common among the media, leading to a lack of high-quality media content and consequently a lack of context for content consumers. In 2024 the communication units who are cited other media is increasing which is helping to track the initial source of any piece of information.

Event Triggers

The study results indicate that in nearly half of the publications, the main reason for creating the content is related to a statement or action by a politician or political party. Largely, the agenda for the 2019 MEP elections is set by politicians and the parties they represent.
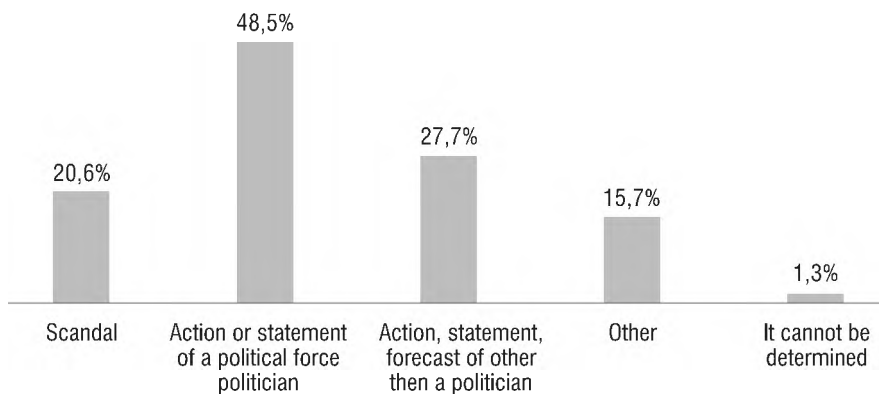
Figure 4. Event Triggers
(% of the total number of analysed communication units)

In comparison, actions or statements by subjects outside the political class are the basis for less than one-third of all publications. The pre-election campaign for the European elections in Bulgaria in 2019 was also accompanied by numerous scandals and contentious topics, which were heavily popularized by online media and are the main reason for creating about one-fifth of online news content.

In 2024 it looks like these results will be like the ones in 2019.

Information Levels of Covered Topics

The study results fully confirm the thesis that the European elections are perceived as second-order national elections[11,12] in 2019 and in 2024.
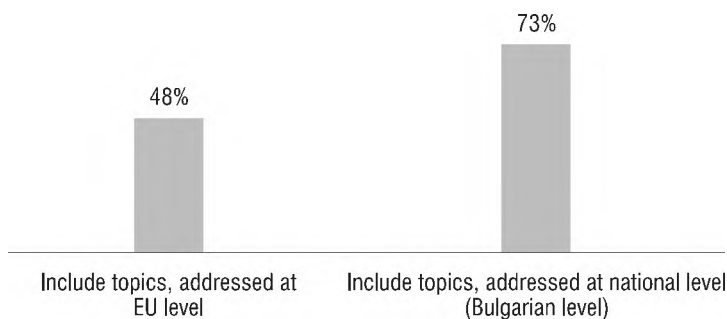

Figure 5. Coverage Level of Topics - EU or Bulgaria
(% of the total number of analysed communication units)

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[11] Reif, K., Schmitt, H. (1980) *Nine second-order national elections: A conceptual framework for the analysis of European election results.* European Journal of Political Research, 8, 3-44.

[12] Hix, S., Lord, C. (1997) *Political Parties in the European Union.* European Union series, St. Martin's Press.

Although European elections are covered, the publications themselves much less often deal with topics on the EU-level agenda. On the contrary, the focus is on specifically Bulgarian problems, which are sometimes linked to European themes.

On the website *monitor.bg*, the issues related to the 2019 MEP elections are almost entirely covering the problematics at the national level, with only 8% of them addressing some of the topics at the European level. An indicative example is the media website *blitz.bg*, where the coverage of topics is primarily at the national level, while issues addressed at the EU level are rare (28%), and their informative value is marginal.

Several media outlets stand out by covering topics at the EU level more often than at the Bulgarian level. Such examples include the website of the public broadcaster BNT (bnt.bg), which positively impacts the information provided to users. It is the most popular online media where the ratio favours content reflecting the European level of the topics discussed, rather than the Bulgarian level. Other such media include *mediapool.bg*, *clubz.bg*, and *tvevropa.com*, while *terminal3.bg* stands out as a news website where all publications address the problem at the European level, though it is also one of the media within the study's scope with a very small number of communication units.
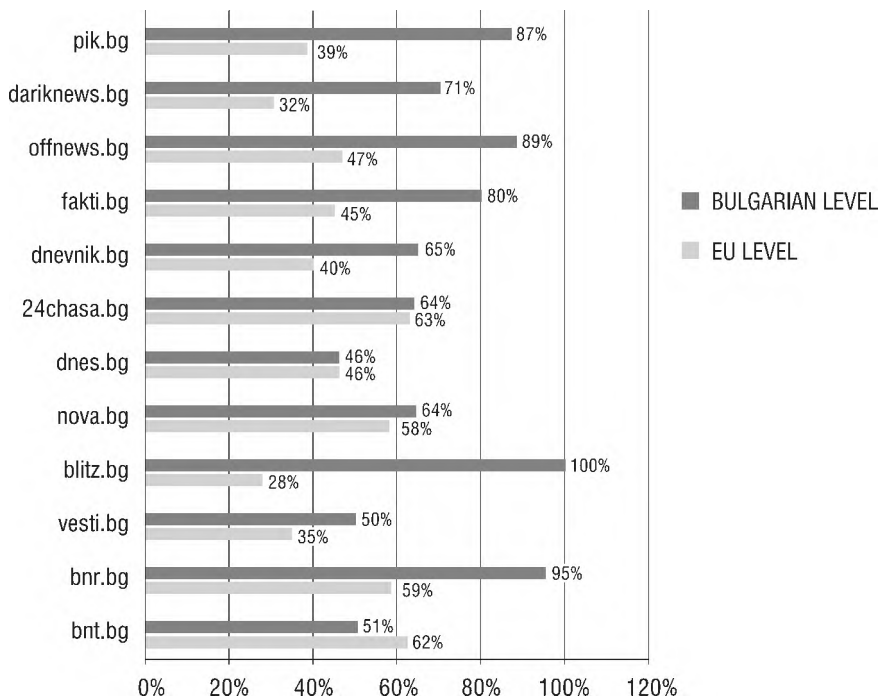

Figure 6. Coverage Level of Topics in the Top 10 Most Popular Media (Bottom-Up) and the Two Public Media (% of Total Analysed Communication Units for Each Media)

Topics and Fields Covered

The debate is so insubstantial and/or unrelated to significant policy issues on the EU agenda that the reasons for politicians' actions or statements are often the elections and their organization, rather than public issues on which a clear political position is expected. Additionally, the analysis shows that European elections and primarily organizational issues related to them are used as a pretext for exchanging criticism between the ruling and opposition parties. Here lies the reason for the absence of topics such as joining the Eurozone or Schengen, where political parties have at least officially similar positions, and the lack of confrontation makes the topic unpopular for them. This tendency is observed as well during the 2024 EP elections. Overall, the study finds that citizens struggle to inform themselves about the dividing lines between parties on policies if they rely on online media in Bulgaria.

Over half of the publications cover organizational and technical issues related to the elections. Domestic political issues account for 40% of all publications, while those related to EU policies constitute 26%. The most frequently covered areas in the media are „economy, innovation, and business" (18%), „labour market, unemployment" (14%), „justice, judicial system, and corruption" (14%), „civil society" (13%), and „institutions".

The issues at the EU level in most cases are generally covered and the informational content lacks specificity and depth. Topics such as the future of the EU, European values, and nationalism allow general political formulations, making them the most frequently addressed in publications. Organizational issues and the structure of the European Parliament are among the most popular topics covered by online media as well.
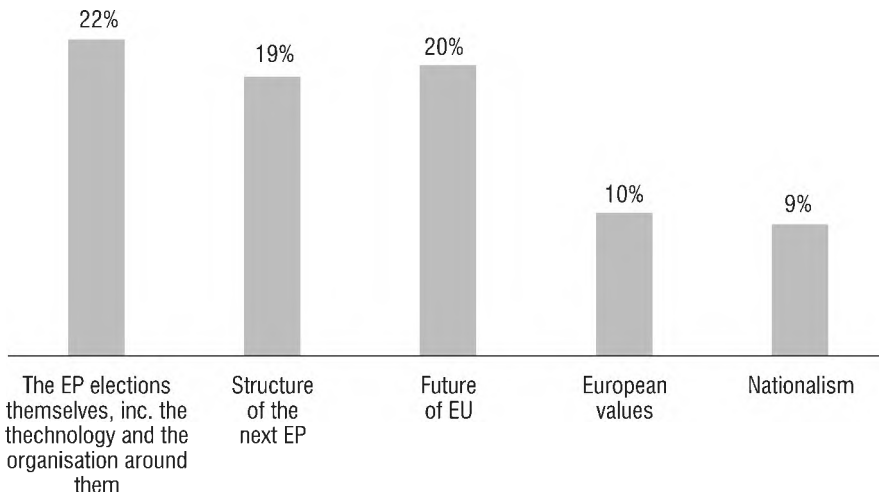
Figure 7. Top 5 Topics Discussed at the EU Level
(% of Total Analysed Communication Units)

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A much broader range of topics is discussed when they are considered at the Bulgarian level. Besides the elections and technical-organizational issues, the positions of national parties are frequently reflected in the media agenda. Voter turnout and campaigns to encourage more citizens to participate in the elections are also significantly covered. Through the lens of Bulgarian politics, topics such as „economy, innovation, and business" and „labour market, unemployment" are often addressed. Bulgaria's place in the EU and political scandals are other dominant themes in Bulgarian online media.
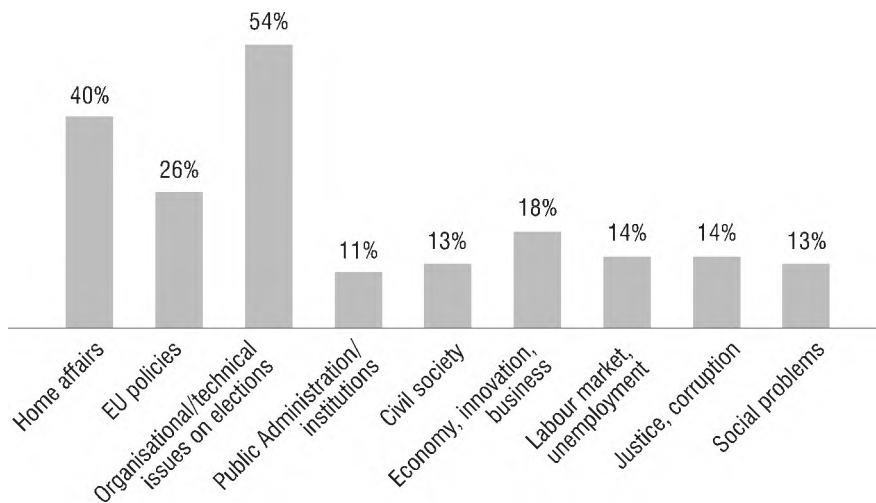

Figure 8. Top Topics Discussed at the Bulgarian Level
(% of Total Analysed Communication Units)

In 72% of the communication units, at least one politician is mentioned by name. In just under 80% of them, the media speak neutrally about politicians, but in one-fifth of the publications, there are clear biases or heightened criticality, sometimes crossing the line of objective coverage. The most frequently mentioned politicians are Boyko Borissov, followed by Delyan Peevski and Korneliya Ninova, who are often the subject of certain attitudes – whether critical or rather flattering, depending on the observed media.
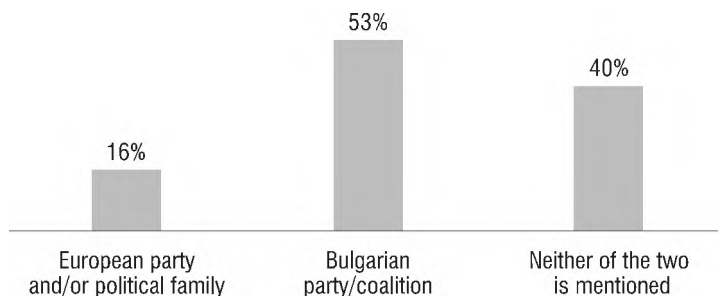

Figure 9. Mention of Party/Political Family
(% of Total Analysed Communication Units)

In about 40% of all communication units, neither a European political family nor a Bulgarian political party or formation is mentioned by name. In contrast, over 50% of the publications mentioned at least one Bulgarian party, and 16% of them mention a European party and/or political family. Communication units that present discussions at the level of European political families are rare. Regarding party affiliation, it can even be noted that European parties are most often mentioned concerning Bulgarian political forces that are part of them.
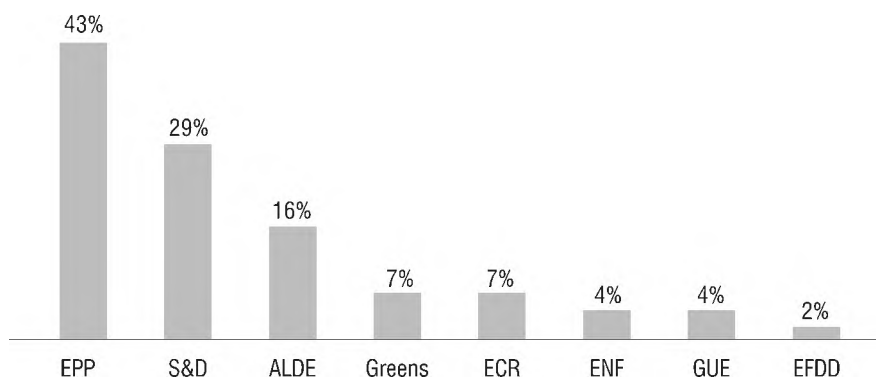

Figure 10. Mention of European Party/Political Family
(% of Total Numbers of Mentioned Parties)

Bulgarian citizens who obtain their information from online media are more informed about the three largest political groups in the European Parliament (EP), namely the European People's Party (EPP), the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), which includes the Party of European Socialists (PES), and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). Other European-level parties are sporadically mentioned and are mostly listed without relevant context or information regarding their policies at the supranational level. Online news consumers may have come across names such as the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF), European Green Party (Greens), European United Left (GUE), and Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD), but their coverage lacks informative value.

Political confrontation

Over 60% of the communication units do not contain direct confrontation, indicating that the main opponents rarely engage in direct clash or debate. And in 2024 this percentage is expected to be higher. Nevertheless, the political landscape in Bulgarian changed for the last 5 year. In this period, six parliamentary elections took place and till the end of 2024 one more is expecting to happen if the parties of the 50 Bulgarian parliament cannot form a government. The results from the 2024 EP election are shape by this political situation in the country and the results

were quite different. Six coalitions from 8 parties managed to send Members to the EP in 2019 in comparison to five coalitions from 6 parties in 2024.

Conclusions

The results of the study show that the statements made by politicians during the 2019 EP election campaign in the online media in Bulgaria were dominated by national issues related to the welfare of citizens and the economy. However, these statements often did not align with the competencies that future Bulgarian MEPs would possess. This tendency is still a valid in 2024. Important issues were marginalised. Likely due to the lack of public opposition between parties on topics such as Bulgaria's accession to Schengen or the adoption of the euro, these issues are almost absent from both the political agenda and media coverage, further substantiating the assertion that European elections are perceived as second-order national elections. The relationship between the absence of debate on substantial European issues and low voter turnout[13] cannot be conclusively proven within the scope of this study, but the study confirmed that this hypothesis is plausible.

It is noteworthy that although the election campaign is built on the principle of political party opposition, most of the analysed communication units do not contain direct confrontation. That is, the main opponents – the ruling party and the opposition – rarely engage in direct clashes or debates, preferring instead to exchange remarks through the media. There is also a tendency in certain media outlets to give more prominence to the statements and actions of certain political forces or their representatives, while other media focus on their opponents. This trend is concerning, especially as preferences in coverage are rarely marked as paid content, which clearly signals that there is another reason for a media outlet to prioritise certain political forces over others.

The positive trend is seen in 2024 compering to 2019 regarding the higher rate of pointed authorship and of the references and citations. Nevertheless, it appears that many of the lessons have not been learned, and it remains difficult for Bulgarian citizens to make an informed decision about whom to support for membership in the European Parliament based on the content of leading Bulgarian online media.

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