

THE ROLE OF MASS-MEDIA IN THE RISE OF NATIONALIST MOVEMENTS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Georgiana STĂNESCU
University of Craiova, Romania

Abstract

European Union is undergoing one of the most difficult periods of its foundation. Many member states are dominated by nationalist current, due to massive immigration, terrorist attacks and financial crisis that crushed the world for over ten years. Above all, there is Brexit - the first popular exit vote of a European Union member country. In this context, while France and Germany face elections and many other situations, a series of extremely right-wing national formations rise on the political stage, determined to exit from the European Union and once again, in this European political frame, the media proves its role as a public opinion trainer.

An in-depth analysis on how this issue has been addressed by the media reflects the fact that in many countries press institutions have favored the consolidation and diversification of populist discourse. UK is the most concrete example where, in the context of a referendum on leaving the European Union,

major newspapers and televisions focused more on issues such as immigration or terrorist attacks and less on the economic implications of leaving the EU.

So, this paper analyzes the role played by the media as the crisis of nationalism rises in the European Union.

Keywords: media, elections, nationalism, extremism, public opinion

1. The media and the inclination of the balance to Brexit

The UK referendum campaign - when citizens were called upon to express their opinion on the UK exit from the European Union - is one of the most concrete moments in which the media was actively involved and the nationalist trend was highlighted. Televisions, newspapers, and especially social networks have played a crucial role in forming opinion among UK citizens. According to a study by King's College London's Center for the Study of Media, Communication and Power in the 10 weeks of the campaign, approximately 15,000 press releases have been published or disseminated. The first example of trying to tilt the balance out of the European Union comes from the traditional *Daily Mail*, which titled on June 23, 2016, on the front page that they are four big lies of the EU, referring to the economic arguments which could lead the UK into an impasse following its exit from the European space. So, there were some clear pro Brexit signs and it was obvious that a newspaper with such a tradition among the British may cause them to think and, especially, make them think more about the issue, even if it does not necessarily cause them to make a decision on the vote.

In fact, during the campaign and before it, nationalism was encouraged by many publications in the UK. Immigration was the most

approached theme in the media, which has long been discussed in the context of sovereignty. (Nunn, 2017)

Pro Brexit leaders have aggressively discussed this issue by pointing out the economic consequences and talking about the damaging effects of this phenomenon. Also during the campaign there were some publications that pointed out this migration issue more than the economic consequences. Daily Express, Daily Mail and Daily Telegraph have given more space on the front pages of this approach. According to "[UK Media Coverage of the 2016 EU Referendum Campaign](#)", conducted by King's College London's Center for the Study of Media, Communication and Power, "coverage of the effects of immigration has been overwhelmingly negative. Migrants have been blamed for many of the problems of the British economy and society, particularly to put unsustainable pressures on the public. In addition, the Turks, the Albanians, as well as the Romanians and Poles, have been indicated as nationalities that are causing problems for the British."

In addition, the media played an important role in staging the agenda during a referendum campaign to leave the European Union. "Media had an agenda-setting role during the campaign centered on certain politicians" (Berry, 2016), most of them oriented to the extreme right. As the research at the University of Loughborough in this edited collection shows, the media reported the campaign as a "Tory" story with more coverage in favor of the arguments for leaving the European Union.

So, in the center of the referendum campaign, key figures, politicians and followers of the nationalist trend emerged, who once enjoyed such a high visibility in the media managed to definitively impose their point of view among the majority of the British. All this meant 51.9% of British citizens voting for the country's exit from the Community Block. All the studies conducted post referendum reflect the fact that media had a major impact on the

inclination of the ballot to the exit, especially since much of the media was loyal to the Eurosceptic current well before the start of the campaign, and the followers of the EU remained unable to put the European Union in a favorable light in order to gain sympathy. (Clarke& Goodwin& Whiteley, 2017)

2. The role of the media during the presidential election campaign in France

Presidential elections took place in France in April 2017, and nearly 47 million Frenchmen were called to the first round. In the second round, two candidates came in: an extreme one that is part of a movement of xenophobic, conservative and anti-Semitic nature and another one that is part of a social-liberal movement.

Considering the political affiliation of one of the candidates, it is easy to understand that the entire electoral campaign was under the emphatic struggle with extremist issues. But, unlike the Brexit Campaign, there was a novelty: fake information campaigns appeared and dominated the social networks. A study by the Oxford Internet Institute highlighted that a quarter of the Twitter news stories were based on false information with the purpose of misinforming the public. According to the study, "these were intentionally presented hyper partisan or conspiratorial, extremely ideological with logical errors and opinions presented as facts". (Desigaud& Howard& Bradshaw, 2017)

Independent newspaper published data from a study published by the Bakamo private research group. The study shown how many of the fake news were based on Russian sources or exposed to Russian influence. In addition, a number of methods would have been used, using the names of heavyweight journalists or famous televisions and publications. More specifically, the authors took advantage of the open blogging platforms of media organizations

such as *Le Monde* or *Mediapart* to publish fake stories and claim to be editorial content, journalistically verified.

An example is the French newspaper *Le Monde*, that published a news release announcing the election results just days before the vote. The *Le Monde* poll announced Marine Le Pen as the winner of the election at a 5 per cent gap with Emmanuel Macron. The story has been distributed by tens of thousands of times on social networks, prompting the idea that most French people tend to choose the extreme variant.

"Another web site claimed that the investigative newspaper *Le Canard Enchaîné* decided not to publish a story showing that Mr. Macron kept an offshore secret account - a claim that was vehemently denounced by the newspaper. The article does not cite a single source or details about the alleged account."

According to the Bakamo study, the so-called time-shifting mechanism was used in the campaign. Specifically, this method involves bringing to the attention of social networking users some past stories that are misleading today. Facebook suspended 30,000 suspicious automated accounts in France, many of them distributing political misinformation and propaganda. All these were highlighted by the fact that in the 2017 campaign, greater freedom was given to online publications than to traditional media institutions. (A. Granchet, 2017).

3. Germany Extremism

The German elections of September 2017 were dominated by a strong extremist current. German Chancellor Angela Merkel's decision to receive a wave of refugees has sparked a real wave of dissatisfaction, thus leading to various nationalist trends with an extremist tinge. In addition, the media has also spoken in this regard. While traditional media institutions were more

reserved, news on social networks was under the banner of disinformation, as happened in France. The Facebook social network, criticized in the United States for allowing and doing nothing to combat fake information, announced before the election that it launched a real campaign to stop the untrue news and that it used a new technology to detect them.

According to Bloomberg "German politicians have accused Facebook of exacerbating anti-immigrant feeling while the social network was seen as an extremist recruitment and propaganda tool."

The month prior to elections, the social network has eliminated "tens of thousands" Facebook fake accounts in Germany. Such accounts have often served as basic principles for fake news in French and US elections. But that was not the case of Germany. However, the target of fake news was Angela Merkel's candidacy. For example, according to Poynter, a global leader in Journalism, a photo of the German Chancellor appearing at a Muslim wedding involving a minor has become viral on Facebook. Moreover, according to BuzzSumo data, over the last five years "BuzzFeed reported in July that seven of the 10 viral stories about Merkel were false."

In order to fight back this fake news phenomenon, the German legislature adopted a law in favor of media companies in the summer of 2017. Specifically, according to the provisions, depending on the seriousness of the reported content, platforms like Facebook or Twitter have 24 hours up to one week to delete the complaints. Otherwise, they are good to pay. Berlin has decided to take these measures because networks such as Facebook and Twitter do not fight back fake news, inciting hatred, child pornography and xenophobia." In Germany, the effect of fake news did not have the same effect as in France or the United States, primarily because the traditional media institutions verified thoroughly the information before publishing or broadcasting it. On the other hand, German citizens have been more attentive

about where they got their news from. So even if there was an attempt to influence the election by inserting false information, their effect was minimal. However, in Germany, the extreme right has reached a record score, but it has been taken into account by the Germans in the current socio-economic context dominated by massive migration.

4. Situation in Sweden

In Sweden, an extreme-right party appeared in Parliament since 2010, but in the 2018 elections it did not settled a trend with strong nationalist accents like in France, Germany or England. However, a phenomenon hard to control took place: the largest spread of fake news in the European Union. According to a study by the Oxford Internet Institute in Sweden, about 22% of the social networks distributed news were false or misleading. Oxford researchers have found that fake articles contained "various forms of extremist, sensational and conspiratorial material." In addition, the *Reuters* news agency reported that the top three sites identified in the report as spreading misleading information were Samhällsnytt, Nyheter Idag and Fria Tider, sites operated by former Swedish right-wing members, Sweden's Democrats (SD). The three websites distributed more than 85% of false information and involved issues such as immigration and Islam. For the time being, no impact study has been conducted to accurately determine the impact of false news on the outcome of the vote.

Conclusions

Over the years, social instability and economic crises have always been the starting point to the initiation and development of extremist, radical, right-wing or left-wing movements. And every time, these movements speculated the moments of vulnerability of the masses to fuel public opinion. In recent years, Europe has been shaken by all sorts of crises and the immigrant crisis was by far the most dominant one. It was the sparkling point for Brexit

crisis and economic problems added naturally. It was the perfect layout for stronger extremist currents that have emerged in developed countries of the European Union, and some media institutions have deliberately supported their development. The media played an overwhelming role in those countries where extremism rapidly developed and where members of these currents have been able to gain public office or have managed to build political parties. It is not necessarily the case of traditional media institutions, but new media, especially social networks filled the gap. But whereas extremism manifested mostly in electoral campaigns in France, Sweden or the UK, on social networks or traditional media in order to break apart the European Union, the German press was much more reluctant to promote extremism.

At the same time, false information or fake news dominated the electoral campaigns in the four countries and that meant disadvantage for traditional parties in favor of left-wing or right-wing counterparts. The four polls have created an unprecedented fight at the social media level, the social networks ending up fighting a real war for the elimination of false information. Fake news and false information turned into a real threat to democratic electoral practices in recent years and managed to determine both social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook to filter the information and also the governments to legislate in this respect.

References

- Bos, L.& van der Brug, W.& Vreese, C., H., 2007, “How the Media Shape Perceptions of Right-Wing Populist Readers https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228472783_How_the_Media_Shape_Perceptions_of_Right-Wing_Populist_Leaders
- Berry M., Understanding the role of the mass media in the EU Referendum/ <https://www.referendumanalysis.eu/eu-referendum-analysis->

[2016/section-1-context/understanding-the-role-of-the-mass-media-in-the-eu-referendum/](#)

Bradshaw, S.& Desigaud, C.& Howard, P., 2017, Could Fake News Alter the Outcome of the French Election?, <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/tag/french-election-2017/>

Capoccia, G., (2005) *Defending Democracy: Reactions to Extremism in Interwar Europe*. London and Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, p.38-39

Farand, C. (2017) French social media awash with fake news stories from sources ‘exposed to Russian influence’ ahead of presidential election, Retrived from

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/french-voters-deluge-fake-news-stories-facebook-twitter-russian-influence-days-before-election-a7696506.html>

Granchet, A. (2017), ‘FR – France’ in *Media Coverage of Elections: The Legal Framework in Europe*, ed. by Maja Cappello, IRIS Special (Strasbourg: European Audiovisual Observatory), p. 47–54.

Golder, M. (2003) Explaining variation in the success of extreme right parties in Western Europe. *Comparative Political Studies* 36(4), p. 432–466

Hedman, F.& Sivnert, F.& Kollanyi, B.& Narayanan, V. &Neudert, L.& Howard, P. (2018), *News and Political Information Consumption in Sweden: Mapping the 2018 Swedish General Election on Twitter*, retrived from Oxford Internet Institute

<http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2018/09/Hedman-et-al-2018.pdf>

Harold, C.& Goodwin, M.& Whiteley, P., (2017)[Cambridge University Press](#), *Brexit Why Britain voted to leave the European Union*

Kahn, J. (2017) Facebook Touts Success Fighting Fake News in German Election, Retrived from <https://www.bloombergquint.com/business/facebook-touts-success-fighting-fake-news-in-german-election#gs.Wxb7E3w>

Minkenberg, M. (2006) Repression and reaction: Militant democracy and the radical right in Germany and France. *Patterns of Prejudice* 40(2), p. 25–44

Moore, M. & Ramsay, G.(2017), UK media coverage of the 2016 EU Referendum campaign, Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and Power, Kings College London Retrived from <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/policy-institute/CMCP/UK-media-coverage-of-the-2016-EU-Referendum-campaign.pdf>

Nunn, D., (2017), Brexit: Britain's Decision to Leave the European Union, Raintree, p. 16-18

van Spanje, S.&de Vreese, C.,H , (2013), “The Good, the Bad and the Voter: The Impact of hate Speech Prosecution of a Politician on Electoral Support for His Party”, *Party Politics*, p. 1-16