

# The Impact of the Media in Election Campaign During the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of Kosovo

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**ABSTRACT:** During the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2021, Kosovars overthrew the national government, which generated a snap parliamentary election. The pandemic affected the election campaign with the restrictions of movement amid strict lockdowns. The pandemic revealed the significance of media usage for political parties and the impact of the pandemic on the relationship between traditional and social media. This article explores the extent to which new and transitional media shaped the election campaign during the Kosovan pandemic. Drawing on media monitoring and surveying, the article found that media—regardless of the quality and frequency of their use by political parties and candidates—do not have a determining role during the pandemic election campaign. Under the conditions of ever-greater use of social media, the article finds that voting preferences and affinity towards specific political parties and candidates is a long-term process that cannot be changed by the quality of the election campaign. On the other hand, regardless of their use, the potential impact of social media turns out to be conditioned by the usage duration and the ability of political entities to interact with the audience.

**KEYWORDS:** media; election campaign; permanent campaign; political parties; COVID-19 pandemic.

## INTRODUCTION

The role of the media in political communication is decisive, not only in broadcasting or transmitting information, but also in shaping the essence of messages communicated to the public, indeed as McNair (2000, p.12) argues “the media do not simply report, in a neutral and impartial way, what is going on in the

political arena around them”. Contemporary media, especially the internet has a much more sophisticated role in interacting with the public through social media, blogospheres, and digital platforms for personalization of communication (Norris, 2004). Although television continues to be the most powerful media outlet as a source of campaign news (Anderson, 2016), social media have become dominant especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers have found that social media played a crucial role in connecting citizens during the lockdowns, thus compensating for the lack of F2F social interaction and in-person communication. As research shows, “Social media were an exceptional resource utilized for risk communication by most national leaders, as well as a way for citizens to stay connected despite lockdown” (Lilleker et al. 2021, p. 339).

In Kosovo, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was accompanied by a political crisis caused by the overthrow of the government, with political developments dominating the media’s agenda. Recent research reveals that

[t]he political crisis meant that space for COVID-19 in the mainstream media was limited, as mainstream television news focused on political topics. The same happened with the main online media, and there were many cases when the main news items on the front page were only about politics. (Gërguri 2021b, p. 321)

However, in the relationship between traditional and new media, as Sartori (2013) notes, the problem does not lie in overcoming television but in integrating various aspects of communication within a specific digital media platform and application. Gilardi et al. (2021) describe this integration: “The Internet and social media have created new ‘hybrid systems’ that have increased the number and types of actors potentially capable of shaping political discourse and agenda” (p.2). Yet, we have limited knowledge of whether these new social media shape voting preferences. Indeed, we have limited knowledge of the impact of the concentration of electoral campaigns during the pandemic.

The study focuses on the role of media in the context of changes in election campaigns as a result of new communication technologies. We aim to analyse the relationship of media usage with results achieved by the political parties during the February 2021 snap national election in Kosovo. The concept of the permanent campaigning has made the research of this topic important, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. As Blumenthal (1980, p.7) argues, permanent campaigning is “the political ideology of our age, which combines image-making with strategic calculation”. Joathan and Lilleker (2020, p. 27) argue “a theoretically informed model for the study of permanent campaigning (...) can be developed as research responds to the diffusion and appropriation of technological innovations for political communication”. However, in an increasingly digitized

environment, the non-stop battle of the government and the opposition for public approval has made the campaign permanent, while the media mainly have a long-term impact on voters.

This paper measures the extent, to which the use of media during the campaign has affected the outcome of elections held in the pandemic. Drawing on media monitoring, surveying, comparison and data analysis, we argue that regardless of the type of media (traditional or new) and their usage, the media do not have a decisive impact during the election campaign because voters are usually predetermined as a result of permanent campaigning. Accordingly, the February 2021 elections in Kosovo have demonstrated that the opposition's permanent campaign was successful in converting citizens' dissatisfaction with the government's performance into political support for their party. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the use of social media in election campaigns, their impact on voters remains conditional on the ability of political entities for long term interaction with them. So, the election campaign during 2021 was further strengthened by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting anti-COVID measures that were implemented during the campaigning. However, the results of the elections also suggest that the use of social media and the way in which political parties report their campaigns do not necessarily reflect the electoral results.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, it offers a brief overview of the context of electoral politics in Kosovo. Then it examines and applies to Kosovo the concept of permanent campaigning enabled by the rise of social media and digital politics.

## THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Since the end of the war in Kosovo in 1999, the country has undergone a significant political, economic, and social transition. The country with the help of the international community, has managed to develop state institutions and the economy, a vibrant civil society, and solid media infrastructure and within two decades, Kosovo has managed to consolidate its democratic institutions and organize free and fair elections. Yet, the country still faces many challenges, such as unresolved disputes with Serbia, limited international integration, and the large migration of its population abroad. On the diplomatic front, Kosovo still remains unrecognized by five European Union (EU) Member States and is still not a member of the United Nations (UN), as its admission

was opposed by Russia and China in the UN Security Council.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, the UN General Assembly, on September 9, 2010, adopted a resolution accepting the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ)<sup>2</sup> on the legality of Kosovo's independence and welcoming EU's readiness to facilitate a normalization dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. The dialogue started in 2011, but it has not yet been concluded due to the confrontational positions of the two sides. Serbia continues to oppose any recognition of Kosovo, while Kosovo does not accept any compromise that would violate its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and constitutional order.

This political process is considered to have a significant impact on the popularity of leaders both in Kosovo and Serbia, therefore the approach of the parties to the dialogue has been a key theme of electoral campaigns (Shahini-Hoxhaj, 2018). Lëvizja Vetëvendosje (LVV), a centre-left party that convincingly won the February 2021 elections has consistently opposed the dialogue and the agreements reached so far, including the contested provisions on the establishment of an Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities.<sup>3</sup> The focus of the Government of Kosovo in this process resulted in economic stagnation and the continuous increase of corruption, factors which caused a gradual decrease of legitimacy of the Government and repaid increase in people's dissatisfaction. Through a populist discourse and being the first in the use of social media (see Gërguri, D. (2021a) that would increasingly penetrate the public, LVV focused on the concept of a *permanent campaign*, and managed to turn citizens' dissatisfaction into political support.

Figure 1 shows the gradual and proportional increase of political support for LVV with increasing dissatisfaction over the years for the work of previous governments. Thus, in 2010, when LVV competed for the first time in the general elections, the level of citizens' satisfaction with the government's performance was higher, which decreased as the support for LVV increased. In other words, the opposition's permanent campaign played a decisive role in reducing the

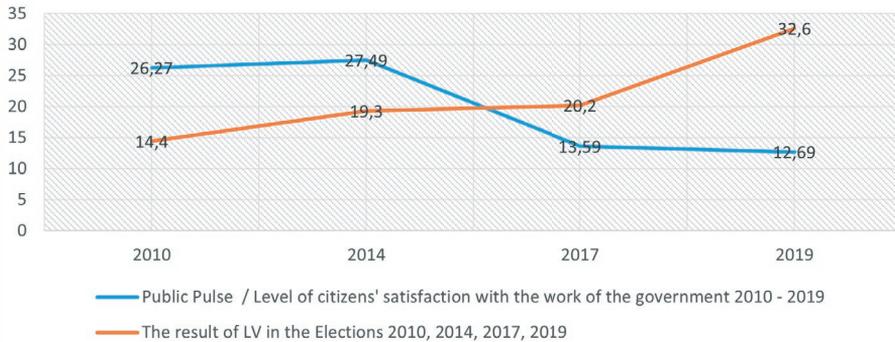
1 Spain, Romania, Slovakia, Greece and Cyprus are the five EU countries that have not yet recognized Kosovo's independence—declared on February 17, 2008. Russia and China that are permanent members of the UN Security Council continue to oppose Kosovo's membership of the UN

2 UN General Assembly, Adopting Consensus Resolution, General Assembly Acknowledges World Court Opinion on Kosovo, Welcomes European Union Readiness to Facilitate Process of Dialogue, available at <https://www.un.org/press/en/2010/ga10980.doc.htm>; EEAS (2013b), Declaration by High Representative Catherine Ashton on behalf of the European Union on the ICJ advisory opinion (12516/10 Presse 2013), 22 July 2010, available at: [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/115902.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/115902.pdf) (accessed 28 November 2021).

3 EEAS (2013a), Association/Community of Serb majority municipalities in Kosovo, available at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/statements-eeas/docs/150825\\_02\\_association-community-of-serb-majority-municipalities-in-kosovo-general-principles-main-elements\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/statements-eeas/docs/150825_02_association-community-of-serb-majority-municipalities-in-kosovo-general-principles-main-elements_en.pdf) (accessed 28 November 2021).

previous government's popularity and laid out the foundations for subsequently overturning the popular support for established parties.

**Figure 1. Correlation Between Citizen Dissatisfaction and Support for LVV**



Source: Central Election Commission (CEC) and the “Public Pulse” of UNDP

Kosovo is still a fragile democracy (Freedom House, 2021), with a weak economy which has been further worsened by the COVID19 pandemic (Luka, 2020), with stagnation regarding the rule of law and obstacles in full international recognition because of which it continues its dialogue with Serbia, mediated by the EU. The February 14th 2021 snap parliamentary election was held due to the decision of the Constitution Court declaring the government led by the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) in coalition with the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), the Social Democratic Initiative (NISMA) and minorities was unconstitutional<sup>4</sup>. The motion initiated by the LDK was supported by all the other parties, including the opposition Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK). At the same time, Kosovo's citizens were panicking because of the threat of the ‘invisible enemy’ of COVID-19. This situation magnified the anger of citizens towards the old traditional parties that ruled the country after the war and enabled them now bring down a new government in the middle of the pandemic. Moreover, stagnation, corruption scandals and nepotism reported over the years in the media created a public opinion that held those parties accountable.

The government overthrown in 2021 was formed following the successful no-confidence motion against the previous government that had emerged as a result of the October 6, 2019 election. This was a coalition led by LVV as the first party in coalition with the LDK. The latter abandoned the coalition after just 51 days, which coincided with the onset of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kosovo (Bytyqi, 2021). Alongside these developments

<sup>4</sup> Constitutional Court decision on subject KO 95/20, available at: <https://gjk-ks.org/en/decisions-from-the-review-session-held-on-21-december-2020/> (accessed 28 November 2021).

and tensions that deepened the political polarization in Kosovo, the February 2021 election were held under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected many aspects of election campaigns around the world. Indeed, many countries initially postponed their elections and later campaigns were subjected to anti-COVID measures, resulting in changes in the form of implementation (Asplund et al., 2021). In this context, the elections, in addition to similar developments regarding social media penetration, have shown that results of political parties do not match the use of media and the way of their reporting during election campaigns.

## ELECTION CAMPAIGN IN THE CONTEXT OF PERMANENT CAMPAIGNING

Election campaigns have evolved continuously as a result of technological development, but the necessity for the presence of the media has remained unchanged. Richard Perloff (2013) defines the campaign as the key to elections that meet the goal of democracy. Based on the periodization of Pippa Norris, the modern campaign from the 1950's to 1980's identifies with television, while the post-modern campaign identifies with the internet (Norris, 2004). Both periods are also characterized by the strategic use of media outside the official periods of the campaign. Hess (2000, p.44) argues that along with changes in the way journalists covered campaigns and changes in what constituted campaign coverage, there were changes in the technology of the media. There were also changes to the economics of the media that would also affect why and how politics and government came to be reported as part of a permanent campaign (Hess 2000, p. 44).

Considering this continuous transformation, the theoretical framework of this research is based on the concept of the *Permanent Campaign*, which the journalist Sidney Blumenthal (1980, p.7) originally defined and “suggests that political representatives need to pursue actions consistent with election campaigning in non-electoral periods to maintain a positive image among the public and thus enable future electoral successes”. However, while the concept of permanent campaigning comes from an offline (analogue) era, recent studies have suggested that the introduction and continued development of the internet has made these practices easier than ever before. The possibilities of self-publishing and control over messages has increased the importance of the internet, especially for less-established political parties, due to the low costs and the parties' limited access to traditional media outlets. The rapid proliferation of social media and their increasing use as primary news sources (Reuters Institute, 2017) has instigated a significant transformation of political communication, with parties and candidates utilizing these digital tools to communicate directly with their

electorate, thereby bypassing the traditional gate-keeping role of mainstream news media (Stetka et al., 2019).

The traditional role of media consists of informing citizens, educating them about the meaning of facts, providing a platform for public discussion and having the watchdog role to institutions through which it influences the formation of public opinion (McNair, 2009, p.33). By contrast, as Tenhunen and Karvelyte (2015) argue, social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, have rapidly grown in importance and today are the central platforms used for political activism that promote citizen engagement in political life. Social media also enable direct and faster communication of politicians with citizens without the mediation of mass media and allow the attainment of new audiences through the distribution of messages posted on personal accounts (Tenhunen & Karvelyte, 2015).

Benjamin Peters points out the democratizing effect of social media, where “all people online will have more voice than before” (2020). As for their impact during the COVID-19 pandemic, Peters emphasizes the substitute role of political-civic interaction. He argues the pandemic has diminished the importance of face-to-face communication with voters and increased online interaction in that “[t]his fact has further increased the power and audience of social media in 2020 compared to previous elections” (Peters, 2020). Considering the increase of democratic media oversight as a result of new communication technologies and a positive development, McNair (2009, pp. 210–211) maintains that “the Internet has increased the difficulty for politicians to control the dissemination of information they would like to keep secret”. An example of this in Kosovo is the Pronto Affair, which has continuously been used in the political discourse against PDK and even during the 2021 national elections<sup>5</sup>.

However, social media have also expanded possibilities of political manipulation. As McNair (2009, p. 38) notes “[o]nly those who have a naive belief in the ethical purity of politicians would deny that manipulation plays an increasingly important role in modern (or postmodern) democratic politics”. The effects of political communication are determined not only by the content of the message, but also by the historical context in which they appear and especially by the political environment that always prevails (McNair, 2009, pp. 43–44). Therefore, the links between a party’s campaign and its expected votes may not be obvious. Referring to UK elections like those of 1992, when polls failed to predict the Conservatives’ victory, McNair argues that voting behaviour patterns change, and the result may not match the quality of the campaign.

5 In August 2016 the newspaper *Insajderi* published a series of recordings that implicated PDK officials in corruption scandals and that have led to a lawsuit against them. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvOQ79xZ\\_BI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvOQ79xZ_BI) (accessed 28 November 2021).

Contextualized in the case of the 2021 elections in Kosovo, this means that the campaign might not have had a significant impact on the electorate. For example, the PDK campaign was praised by commentators, and considering the crises this party experienced after the arrest of its leaders, it would have scored an even worse result if it had not run a good campaign. As Jay Blumler puts it

at a time when public confidence in many social and political institutions has plummeted, voters have become more dependent on the media... to create the impression of what game is being played, while previous suppliers of governing structures have lost their credibility. (Blumler 1987, p. 170)

This means that the decline of the pyramid model of political communication (the flow of messages from politics to the media and thence to the audience, which Blumler says elite staff largely organized) with the advent of the internet, has made audiences a communication force that the former monopolists of political communication must follow closely (Blumler, 2016).

The internet has also changed the structure of political communication, which unlike television is limited to the visual effect. Sartori's (2013, p.87) conclusions about the effect of video politics, which has almost destroyed mass parties (collection of votes no longer requires a capillary organization of headquarters and activists), also applies to LVV. Although the party did not have an extended and well-established structure, has achieved a historic result in the last election. Community life in rural and urban areas of Kosovo differ greatly, the greater increase of virtual socialization in cities as a result of greater use of social media and better performance of LVV in urban areas, its success can be explained by the long-term effect of media and its permanent campaign through social media. Joathan and Lilleker (2020) contend "a theoretically informed model for the study of permanent campaigning can be developed as research responds to the diffusion and appropriation of technological innovations for political communication".

Explaining the differences between campaigning and governance, Helco (2000, p.12) emphasizes that the first is an exercise in persuasion that consists of promises and affirmations, while the second presupposes deliberation and efforts to reach consensus even with opponents. In an increasingly digitized environment, the non-stop struggle by the government and the opposition for public approval has made the campaign *permanent*, while the media mainly have a *long-term impact* on voters. It means that during the official campaign, neither social media nor a good campaign can restore the public's lost trust. In sum, technological advancement has changed the way campaigns are conducted, with the internet playing a major role in the success of campaigns. Politicians are no longer dependent on the traditional media to reach their electorate but

are now able to reach them directly through social and digital media. This has allowed for more direct communication between politicians and their electorate and has also allowed for greater opportunities to control the preferences of voters. The internet has increased the difficulty for politicians to control the dissemination of information and, as a result, has increased the importance of media oversight and has also changed the structure of political communication, with video politics now playing an important role in the success of campaigns.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper focuses on the campaign during the pandemic (held between 3–12 February 2021) for the snap parliamentary elections held in February 2021 in Kosovo. To compare the use of mainstream media and social media by political parties during the campaign, research for this paper included television, because television remains the most trusted media type in Kosovo (Zeneli, 2021, p. 141) and Facebook, the most used social media (Internet World Stats 2021). The data used regarding television were generated from the media monitoring report during the early election campaign 2021 (Independent Media Commission, 2021). The data on Facebook were manually extracted from personal accounts of candidates for the post of Prime Minister and the accounts of their respective parties: Enver Hoxhaj of the PDK; Avdullah Hoti of the LDK; Ramush Haradinaj of the AAK and Albin Kurti of the LVV). Facebook's data involved measuring activity (posts) and interactivity (shares, likes and comments) during the campaign period.

Furthermore, as the Covid-19 pandemic social distancing and lockdowns had rendered face-to-face interactions impossible, an online survey was conducted with 270 respondents through random sampling, from June 1 to 14, 2021. The questionnaire was distributed via FB, with the announcement that only those who had voted in the February 2021 elections should answer (see Table 1). This meant that the sample represented 48.78% of the citizens who participated in the voting, respectively 871,796 out of 1,851,927 registered voters.<sup>6</sup> The sample becomes even more representative because the list of voters also includes citizens living in the Diaspora (Kosovo is a country with a high rate of emigration of citizens mainly to the countries of Western Europe). According to the data from the Population Census of 2011, the Diaspora of Kosovo had 703,978

6 Central Election Commission, Zgjedhjet për Kuvendin e Kosovës 2021, Rezultatet Përfundimtare nga QNR, Available at: <https://kqz-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/1.Statistikat-e-pergjithshme-1.pdf> (accessed 28 November 2021).

citizens or 28.34% of the total population<sup>7</sup>, because according to the Kosovo Agency of Statistics (2021), the resident population is only 1.74 million inhabitants. Analysis of the data extracted from SPSS on the variables revealed the samples demographics, that most of the respondents belonged to the age group of 18–35 years (63%), 36–50 years (31%) and 51 years and older (6%). These statistics generally correspond to the data of the Kosovo Agency of Statistics that claims half the population of Kosovo is under the age of 35<sup>8</sup>, which mirrors the age of the majority of social media users (Zeneli, 2021, p.147). Meanwhile, Kosovo’s population in the context of the urban (52%) and rural (48%) divide, is split almost 50/50 and while internet penetration is 96% of the population (Eurostat 2021), as many rural residents have access to the internet and social media as do their urban counterparts.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Gender		Residence	
Female	141	Rural	129
Male	129	Urban	141

Age		Education	
18–35	169	High school	27
36–50	84	University	243
51 +	17		

Source: Authors

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The 2021 elections in Kosovo demonstrate a significant change of party support in Kosovo. Table 2 below shows that all traditional parties had a negative result, while the LDK suffered the biggest loss by the number of votes. These results showed that despite greater activity on social media and the way media was used during the campaign, none of these parties managed to retain the electorate of two years previously. The use of social media and the digitalization of the political communication process has led to the development of permanent

7 Kosovo Agency of Statistics, Migrimi Kosovar, Prill 2014, Available at: <https://ask.rks-gov.net/media/1379/migrimi-kosovar-2014.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2wDB221kW4XdzzNaznpsTXhXILrvo5NC-q0wjxp3S5a1QSojaWNGGfh3A> (accessed 21 July 2022).

8 Kosovo Agency of Statistics, Kosovanë Shifra 2021, Available at: <https://ask.rks-gov.net/media/6861/kosova-n%C3%AB-shifra-2021.pdf> (accessed 22 July 2022).

campaigns, an environment where voter behaviour is not only influenced by the official campaign, but also by the long-term effect of media and the permanent campaign through social media. Considering the 2021 elections in Kosovo, it seems that the traditional parties were unable to restore the loss of trust by the public, while the newcomer LVV did manage to benefit from the permanent campaign.

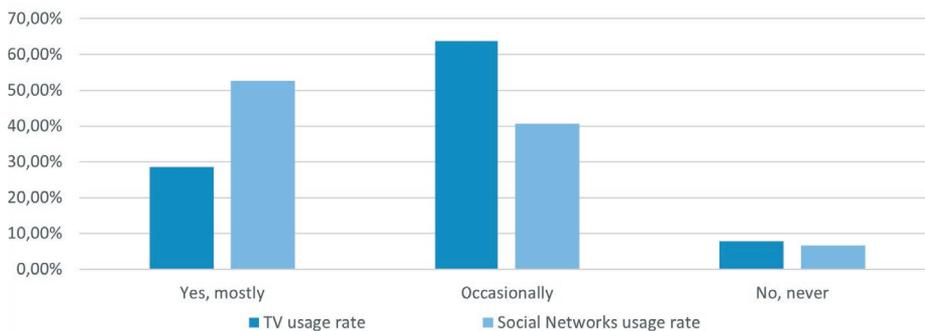
**Table2. Results of Political Parties in 2019 and 2021 National Elections**

	2019 election	2021 election
LDK	24.55 %	12.73 %
PDK	21.23 %	17.00 %
AAK	11.50 %	7.12 %
NISMA	5 %	2.52 %
LVV	26.27%	50.27%

Source: Central Election Commission (CEC)

During the election campaign, voters were informed more on social media than on television, although in Kosovo television continues to be the most reliable media (Zeneli 2021, p.141). As shown in Figure 2, over 52% of respondents stated that they were informed mainly through social media, while only 28% of were informed through television.

**Figure 2. Usage of TV and Facebook in the 2021 election campaign in Kosovo**

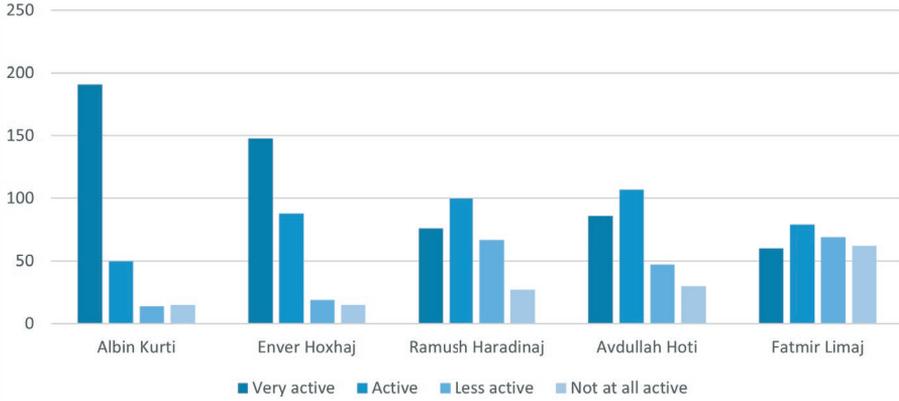


Source: Author

Facebook, as the most popular social media in the world, has the highest usage rate in Kosovo (Statista, 2021). This was confirmed by results of the survey, since 54% of respondents stated that they use this social media platform, which suggested political parties have focused their campaign mainly on Facebook. According to the respondents' perception, (see Figure 3) the most active candidates

on Facebook during the campaign were Albin Kurti (LVV), followed by Enver Hoxhaj (PDK), then Avdullah Hoti (LDK), Ramush Haradinaj (AAK), and finally Fatmir Limaj (NISMA).

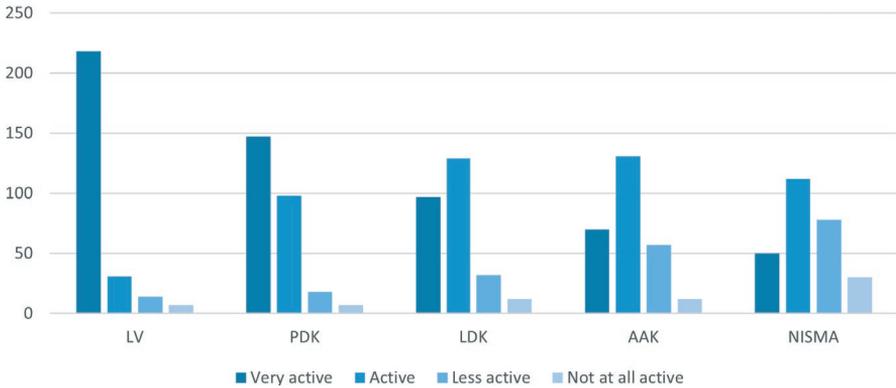
**Figure 3. The most active political party leaders on Facebook during the 2021 election campaign in Kosovo**



Source: Authors

Figure 4 shows the activity of the political parties.

**Figure 4. The most active political parties on Facebook during the 2021 election campaign in Kosovo**



Source: Authors

By contrast, the data processed from the Facebook accounts of each party’s candidate shows a variation in the results, which can be explained by the high degree of interactivity (likes, comments and shares) by Albin Kurti over other candidates (see Table 3). This means that despite a smaller number of posts, each has appeared to more people through comments and shares, which has created the

impression of Albin Kurti having been the most active candidate during the campaign. Indeed, the most active candidate on Facebook was Avdullah Hoti (LDK), whom respondents ranked third most popular out of five candidates. Even in this case, the perception is related to the level of *interactivity*, for which Hoti was ranked lower than the two candidates before him (especially with the number of shares).

**Table 3. Interactivity of political party leaders on Facebook during the 2021 election campaign in Kosovo**

Leader	Posts	Likes	Comments	Shares
Albin Kurti	23	Max. 34 k Min. 5	Max. 11 k Min. 386	Max. 1,8 k Min. 92
Enver Hoxhaj	79	Max. 10 k Min. 396	Max. 2,7 k Min. 33	Max. 512 Min. 13
Avdullah Hoti	141	Max. 8.4 k Min. 129	2,9 k 9	Max. 293 Min. 12
Ramush Haradinaj	71	Max. 9.4 k Min. 880	6,8 k 42	Max. 534 Min. 223

Source: Authors

Thus, the explanation of the discrepancy between the results of the research on activity and interactivity in social media, which correlates with the ranking of political entities from the results of the 2021 elections, supports the second hypothesis, which conditions their influence on voters with the ability of political parties to interact. In this context, there should be consideration that LVV is not only the first political party in Kosovo to have started using social media but has also benefitted from it more than other political parties.

The results of research on the use of media during the 2021 elections campaign show the same trend in the case of television. The Independent Media Commission Report, which included the monitoring of three channels with national coverage: the public broadcaster (RTK1) and the two commercial televisions (KTV and RTV21). The most frequent presence was the LDK, although in this election it was the biggest loser with only 12.73% of the vote. On the other hand, LVV which had the least presence on television (except for NISMA, which did not cross the 5% threshold in the election), by largely boycotting debates and avoiding interviews as shown in Table4, achieved the biggest victory with over 50% of the total vote. This means that even the level of television use did not have a significant impact on voters' decision on whom to vote, which supports the main hypothesis that during the campaign media did not play a decisive role due to the greater influence of the political context. However, here the context implies the dominant opinion in the public sphere, which is nevertheless a result of the long-term effect of media.

**Table 4. TV usage by political parties during the 2021 election campaign in Kosovo**

	RTK			KTV			RTV21		
	News	Debates	Interviews	News	Debates	Interviews	News	Debates	Interviews
LV	16.74	15.07	0	22.23	26.72	9.31	19.53	8.58	0
PDK	17.57	22.26	16.66	19.17	26.35	24.56	19.66	24.10	52.25
LDK	17.55	21.77	29.83	21.06	25.31	27.92	19.56	26.44	47.75
AAK	17.82	18.64	28.53	20.39	18.89	25.24	21.86	18.69	0
NISMA	15.25	17.08	24.98	17.15	2.73	12.97	19.39	9.58	0
Other political parties	15.1	6.2	0	0	0	0	0	12.7	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100 %</b>								

Source: Independent Media Commission (Monitoring report – Snap Parliamentary Election in Kosovo 2021)

Indeed, the campaign was conducted in under conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictive measures in force, such as the mask mandate or prohibition of gatherings with more than 50 people, and which were not complied with by political parties. This assessment is shared by most respondents, but also by most organizations that have monitored the election campaign, such as Democracy in Action (2021)—a civil society election monitoring coalition.

Political parties kept organizing activities with a large number of citizens, ignoring the restrictions regarding the allowed number of participants. At the same time, non-compliance with physical distance and mask mandate rules has been evident in almost all monitored activities. (Democracy in Action (2021)

On the other hand, over 77% of respondents said that these measures were not complied with at all, while 20% of them think that political parties have partially complied with them.

This shows that political parties have not only been focused on the media campaign. In order to explore this, Facebook posts of the candidates and their political parties are categorized, according to the content: direct posts—messages inviting citizens to vote; indirect posts—informative messages related to candidates and their political parties; and in combined posts—both informative and vote mobilizing messages. Monitoring of Facebook activity shows a smaller number of direct posts compared to other categories, which means that the use of social media was focused on informing about activities rather than in mobilizing or persuading voters to vote for respective candidates and political parties (see Table 5).

**Table 5. Each candidate’s Facebook posts during the 2021 election campaign in Kosovo, according to content.**

	Direct posts	Indirect posts	Combined posts
Enver Hoxhaj	19	38	5
Avdullah Hoti	9	48	3
Ramush Haradinaj	4	35	8
Albin Kurti	7	8	0

Source: Authors

However, despite the increase in activities in social media, largely dictated by the pandemic, the candidates’ posts on Facebook were dominated by campaign related promotional content. Meanwhile, personalization of elections messages in social media dominated communication by campaign candidates (Fetoshi, 2016, p. 589–600). Research shows that citizens’ voting patterns in election were predetermined. The survey results show that 83% of respondents stated that they had known prior to the campaign which party would gain their vote, which is indicative of the role of the political context in determining voters’ behaviour.

Most respondents (44%) stated the political context (performance of political parties in the past) influenced their decision on the vote, while only 5.2% stated they have been influenced by media. Meanwhile, the image of the leader according to this poll, influenced the citizens’ votes by 18.15% and the party program by 32.59 %.

**Table 6. Cross-tabulation of pre-determined voters (N=270) and factors influencing the voting decision (%) during the 2021 election campaign in Kosovo**

	What has determined your vote?				Total	
	Political context	Leader	Media	Political party program		
9. Did you know before the campaign which party you are going to vote for?	YES	5.93%	1.85%	3.70%	4.82%	16.30%
	NO	38.15%	16.30%	1.48%	27,77%	83,70%
	<b>Total</b>					<b>100%</b>

Source: Authors

Even when crosschecking the data on audience of social media, television or on the basis of variables like residence, educational background or age, the results again display the context as the most influential factor for citizens’ voting patterns. So, since LVV during the official campaign did not use the media more than other parties shows that the party managed to use them more effectively in a longer term through permanent campaigning.

In summary, the 2021 parliamentary elections in Kosovo were marked by the increased use of social media, which had a limited impact on voters' decision making due to the greater influence of the political context. Contemporary media, mainly television and social networks, were used mainly for promotional content, while personalization of messages was dominant in communication through social media. Despite the increase in activities in social media, the political context, specifically permanent campaigning, played the decisive role in determining voters' behaviour.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the role of media in the 2021 election campaign in Kosovo was minimal, as the political context determined the voters' choices. Social media did play a conditional role, in which long-term interactive communication was more influential than the official campaign. This showed that media have a greater impact when used for permanent campaigning and that public opinion is a decisive factor in the election results. In particular, the use of media during the election campaign did not reflect the performance of political parties competing for power. The votes in Kosovo in the 2021 election were pre-determined due to the context, which was primarily related to the citizens' accumulated dissatisfaction over years with the traditional political parties. A secondary correlation was the overthrow of the government led by LVV in autumn 2020—i.e., in the middle of the pandemic. Data on the use of media, both television and social media, showed that their roles during the election campaign were minimal. Although they were used more by parties other than LVV, this political party achieved the biggest victory in the history of national elections in Kosovo, confirming the main hypotheses of this article. This finding should not be understood as relativizing the role of the media in election campaigns. On the contrary, the media have gained even greater importance, but in the framework of the continuous transformations of election campaigns.

As Larsson (2016) observes in a quantitative study of the permanent campaign on Facebook, small political parties have managed to compensate their limited access to the mainstream media through the internet. The primary use of Facebook over other social media for communication with the public, combined with the political context explained above, favoured LVV in relation to the other parties in 2021 snap election in Kosovo. Voters were not affected by the image or quality of the campaign, as they voted to punish all parties that had governed in the past. However, the unexpected outcome was that for the first time in the parliamentary history of Kosovo, a single entity (since the successful Guxo candidates ran as a 'list' within the LVV) won over 50% of the vote. While many analysts

considered this outcome impossible due to the electoral system<sup>9</sup>, the result confirms the hypothesis that voters are largely predetermined by the context of political developments and that official campaigns usually have minimal impact on undecided voters. The result showed that the use of media (traditional or digital) during the official campaign does not have a decisive role in election results, while the analysis of the survey data revealed that *political context* is the most influential factor in determining citizens' votes.

The result that citizens use more social media (52%) than traditional ones, confirms their greater impact through long-term interactive communication and supports the thesis of transforming the campaign in favour of a permanent campaign. As Bobbio (1987, p. 83) suggests, public opinion can have an impact on political reality only when the acts of anyone in supreme power are subject to public scrutiny, showing how visible, consistent, achievable and accountable they are. This means that no matter how good or expensive a party's campaign is, it will not have an electoral effect if it goes against the expectations of public opinion.

On the other hand, despite having been less active on Facebook than its political counterparts, LVV had greater interaction (likes and shares) with Facebook users. This result confirms the hypothesis of the conditional impact of social media on this election campaign. The discrepancy between the data obtained from monitoring and those of the survey regarding the degree of media use confirms the thesis of permanent campaigning due to new political communication platforms and reaffirms the theory of the long-term effects of media. In the circumstances of a public space overloaded with information, the political opinion of the majority has become a constant vector that changes more slowly as a result of consistency and consensus of the media.

Moreover, with the increasing use of social networks due to the COVID-19 pandemic, research has shown that they have not replaced face-to-face communication, which would have avoided violating restrictive measures by the candidates. Apart from monitoring organizations, respondents of the survey confirmed the non-compliance with anti-COVID-19 measures. This means that political parties were not focused on online campaigning, which is supported by the parties' Facebook accounts having had more informative posts about campaign activities than influential content seeking to persuade voters. These dynamics also impacted this research, primarily in relation to the sample size and because its socio demographic structure cannot be very clear due to the survey being online. These limitations notwithstanding, this paper can be useful as an attempt to explore the changing trend of election campaigns

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<sup>9</sup> Kosovo has a proportional electoral system with open lists and only one constituency. Available at: <http://old.kuvendikosoves.org/common/docs/ligjet/2010-256-eng.pdf> (accessed 28 November 2021).

in the triangle between political actors, media, and the public. Therefore, in order to generalize the results of the research, future research on this topic should be aimed at including a larger number of respondents who represent the voters' structure as clearly as possible.

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