

## **Social Media and the Deliberative Disintegration of Political Communication: Citizen-Candidate Dynamics on Facebook During Electoral Campaigns<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the dynamics of citizen-candidate communication on Facebook during the 2024 local elections in Bucharest, focusing on how digital platforms shape political discourse and civic engagement. Using content analysis, it examines the campaign strategies of three major contenders—Nicușor Dan, Gabriela Firea, and Cristian Popescu-Piedone—highlighting patterns of policy framing, negative campaigning, populist rhetoric, and the interplay between emotional and factual appeals. In parallel, the analysis investigates voter interactions, assessing engagement intensity, discursive diversity, incivility, and ideological polarization. Findings reveal that instead of fostering inclusive deliberation, Facebook acted as a catalyst for deliberative disintegration, amplifying fragmentation, reinforcing echo chambers, and undermining democratic resilience. The results raise important questions about the platform's role in shaping public discourse and the quality of electoral communication in algorithmically curated environments.

*Keywords:* affective polarization, deliberative disintegration, incivility online, political communication on Facebook, populist rhetoric

## **Social Media and the Deliberative Disintegration of Political Communication: Citizen-Candidate Dynamics on Facebook During Electoral Campaigns**

### **Introduction**

The rise of social media has significantly transformed political communication, reshaping the interaction between politicians and citizens. Digital platforms have dismantled traditional barriers to political engagement, offering individuals unprecedented access to public discourse, a space for opinion-sharing, and tools for mobilization (Shane, 2004). Advocates of digital democracy highlight these changes

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as positive, arguing that social media fosters deliberative dialogue and enhances inclusivity by amplifying marginalized voices. Loader and Mercea (2011) as well as Momoc (2014) describe this transformation as technological empowerment, emphasizing the potential of digital tools to broaden democratic participation and civic engagement.

Several global political events illustrate this perspective. The Arab Spring demonstrated how platforms like Facebook and Twitter became tools of political activism, enabling protesters to coordinate demonstrations, bypass state-controlled media, and initiate large-scale political change in the Middle East (Howard & Hussain, 2013). Similarly, Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns showcased social media's potential for mobilizing young voters, fundraising, and efficiently disseminating campaign messages (Kreiss, 2016). In Romania, Klaus Iohannis' unexpected victory in the 2014 elections was largely attributed to social media's role in activating the diaspora and shaping electoral outcomes (Marincea, 2015).

Despite these optimistic views, the role of social media in democracy remains highly contested. A Pew Research Center study (2022) found that while many citizens acknowledge social media's democratic potential, concerns over misinformation, polarization, and digital platform manipulation have intensified, particularly in the United States.

While social media has facilitated broader civic engagement, it has also provided an environment where populist rhetoric, polarizing narratives, and extremist ideologies thrive. The same mechanisms that facilitate free political expression also contribute to the spread of disinformation and manipulation, raising questions about social media's long-term impact on democratic stability.

Beyond misinformation, social media can also distort electoral processes; politically driven digital platforms influence democratic decision-making show that confirmation biases on social media contribute to slower political learning and increased polarization. Scarano et al. (2024) highlight how Twitter-based electoral polls during the 2020 United States presidential election were manipulated by inauthentic activity, reinforcing conspiracy theories about voter fraud.

The role of digital propaganda and automated bots in political fragmentation is equally concerning. Robles et al. (2024) examine how bots were deployed during Spain's COVID-19 crisis to escalate political tensions and incivility. These findings are consistent with the research conducted by Ferrara et al. (2016) and Howard et al. (2018), who document how computational propaganda amplifies misinformation and manipulates public opinion.

These studies highlight the darker implications of social media. While digital platforms have created new opportunities for participation and discourse, they also pose substantial risks to electoral integrity, political cohesion, and democratic stability (Păuș & Ștefănel, 2016). Understanding these challenges requires a nuanced analysis of how social media interacts with political processes and how regulatory measures could mitigate its most harmful effects.

## **Deliberative Democracy, Populism, and Political Polarization in the Digital Age**

The rise of social media has sparked debates about its impact on democratic processes. A key question arises: Does social media promote deliberative democracy—where diverse perspectives engage in rational discourse—or does it amplify populism and polarization through emotional appeals, disinformation, and algorithmic biases?

Jürgen Habermas' concept of the public sphere provides a theoretical foundation for deliberative democracy. In "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" (1962), Habermas defines the public sphere as a space for rational-critical debate, where individuals discuss public matters free from state or economic interference. This idealized model emphasizes reason, inclusivity, and equality, facilitating legitimate democratic decision-making through open dialogue. Deliberative democracy, rooted in this theory, envisions a system where public reasoning—not just voting or majoritarian rule—determines political legitimacy.

Unlike aggregative democratic models, which emphasize vote-counting, deliberative democracy prioritizes the quality of discourse. It requires political arguments to undergo scrutiny, counterarguments, and rational debate before reaching a consensus. The legitimacy of democratic decisions depends on the inclusiveness and rationality of public deliberation. However, deliberative democracy assumes that public debate is free from manipulation, coercion, and emotional distortions—a condition often compromised in digital environments.

### **Populism: A Conceptual Overview**

Populism is commonly understood as a discourse that divides society into two antagonistic groups: the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite." This binary opposition is central to populist rhetoric, which portrays elites as disconnected from ordinary citizens and seeks to reclaim political power for the "true" will of the people. Scholars such as Canovan (1999) and Kazin (1995) highlight the persuasive nature of populism, arguing that it functions primarily as a rhetorical strategy rather than a coherent ideological framework.

Populism is often associated with anti-establishment sentiments, emotional appeals, and crisis narratives that simplify complex political issues (Ștefănel, 2016). Müller (2016) argues that populist actors claim to exclusively represent the will of the people, positioning their opponents as illegitimate or even as enemies of democracy. This exclusionary approach contributes to political polarization, reinforcing "us versus them" narratives that erode democratic consensus-building.

### **The Role of Social Media in Populist Mobilization**

The affinity between social media and populist rhetoric has been well-documented. Unlike traditional media, which serves as a gatekeeper, digital platforms allow populist leaders to communicate directly with their supporters, circumventing

institutional filters. Social media enables the construction of an “authentic” political persona, enhancing populists’ appeal by creating a sense of direct and unmediated engagement.

Empirical studies confirm that populist movements are particularly adept at leveraging social media for mobilization. Moreover, digital platforms facilitate the formation of online echo chambers, where users are exposed primarily to like-minded opinions, reinforcing ideological divisions. Social media algorithms prioritize content that elicits strong emotional reactions, which often means amplifying populist and extremist discourse while suppressing moderate viewpoints. This phenomenon contributes to an environment where political debates become increasingly adversarial rather than deliberative.

## **Research Question and Empirical Investigation**

The role of social media in democracy presents an empirical challenge: how does it function in real electoral contexts, particularly in societies experiencing democratic consolidation and political fragmentation? This study addresses this question by analyzing the 2024 local elections in Bucharest, investigating whether Facebook functioned as a deliberative space or as a platform for populist mobilization and polarization. Given Facebook’s dominant role in Romania’s digital landscape, it serves as the primary venue for political communication, where candidates and voters interact, exchange ideas, and engage in discussions.

RQ1: How has Facebook shaped political communication and voter engagement in the 2024 Bucharest local elections?

RQ2: Does Facebook foster deliberative democracy by encouraging rational debate and participation, or does it amplify populist rhetoric and political polarization?

## **Empirical Analysis: Political Discourse and Engagement on Facebook**

This study systematically examines how the three most relevant candidates in the 2024 Bucharest local elections framed their campaign discourse on Facebook and how voters engaged with their posts through comments. The analysis focuses on two primary dimensions: the nature of campaign discourse and the dynamics of voter interaction, both of which are crucial in assessing whether social media fosters deliberative democracy or exacerbates populism and polarization.

## **Campaign Discourse: Framing of Political Messages**

One of the central aspects of this study is the way candidates structured their campaign messages on Facebook. A deliberative democratic environment encourages fact-based discussions, promotes substantive policy debates, and prioritizes rational arguments over emotionally charged rhetoric. In contrast, a populist and polarized environment is more likely to be dominated by negative campaigning, anti-elitist discourse, and emotionally driven appeals.

The analysis of campaign discourse will focus on the following key indicators:

Table 1: Analytical Framework: Evaluating Campaign Rhetoric in the Digital Public Sphere

Indicator	Description	Measurement Criteria
Policy-Oriented Content	Posts discussing concrete policies, programs, and governance strategies.	Ratio of fact-based vs. vague/emotional rhetoric.
Negative Campaigning	Posts attacking political opponents instead of presenting constructive proposals.	Ratio of negative vs. positive campaign messages.
Use of Populist Rhetoric	Simplistic messaging, anti-elitism, and "people vs. elite" narratives.	Frequency of populist keywords (e.g., "corrupt elite," "betrayal of the people").
Fact-Based vs. Emotional Appeals	Emphasis on rational argumentation vs. emotional triggers.	Ratio of fact-based statements vs. emotionally charged language.

By examining these elements, the study will determine whether the 2024 Bucharest local election campaign on Facebook was primarily issue-driven or if it followed the global trend of increasingly emotionalized and populist digital political communication.

### **Voter Engagement and Interaction: Nature of Facebook Discussions**

Beyond candidate discourse, the study also evaluates the nature of voter interactions on Facebook. While social media offers the potential for deliberative engagement, online discussions are often shaped by confirmation bias, ideological echo chambers, and incivility. The ability of social media platforms to facilitate meaningful political debate depends on whether they foster constructive, multi-perspective discussions or whether they serve as closed environments that reinforce pre-existing biases and hostility toward opposing views.

This analysis includes the following key indicators of voter engagement:

Table 2: Key Metrics of Civic Engagement and Polarization in Online Campaign Discussions

Indicator	Description	Measurement Criteria
Level of Engagement	Volume of likes, shares, and comments per post.	Engagement rate per candidate/topic.
Diversity of Interactions	Meaningful debate vs. one-sided support/opposition.	Ratio of constructive comments vs. partisan reinforcement.
Incivility in Discussions	Presence of hate speech, insults, and derogatory language.	Frequency of toxic comments.
Echo Chambers & Polarization	Extent to which comments reflect ideological rigidity rather than dialogue.	Proportion of reinforcing opinions vs. counterarguments.

This study examined the campaign discourse and voter engagement on the official Facebook pages of three key candidates:

Nicușor Dan – the incumbent mayor, supported by USR, a party in opposition at the national level at the time.

Gabriela Firea – former mayor of Bucharest (2016-2020), defeated by Nicușor Dan in the previous elections, and backed by PSD, the governing social-democratic party. However, at the time of the election, Firea was embroiled in internal conflicts within her party's leadership.

Cristian Popescu-Piedone – a controversial political figure and former mayor of Sector 5, forced to resign following the Colectiv nightclub fire tragedy (2015), in which over 60 young people lost their lives due to safety violations linked to suspected corruption in the issuance of permits. After serving time in prison, he was later rehabilitated by the judiciary and sought a political comeback.

Given these candidates' distinct political backgrounds and public perceptions, their Facebook campaigns and interactions with voters provide a rich context for examining whether social media functioned as a space for deliberative democracy or as a vehicle for populism and polarization.

## **Data Collection and Methodology**

This study examines Facebook posts and user comments from the final week of the electoral campaign, a period marked by heightened political engagement and intensified messaging strategies. The analysis employs content analysis, systematically coding both candidate posts and user interactions to identify patterns in political communication.

To ensure a structured and objective approach, we applied the analytical grid detailed earlier, evaluating campaign discourse (policy-oriented messaging, populist rhetoric, emotional vs. fact-based appeals) and voter engagement (incivility, diversity of perspectives, presence of echo chambers). To enhance accuracy and depth, we utilized NVivo software, which enabled qualitative and quantitative text analysis, facilitating the categorization of themes, sentiment analysis, and keyword mapping.

Through this methodological framework, the study aims to determine whether candidates engaged voters through rational debate and substantive policy discussions or whether their digital campaigns were primarily driven by negative messaging, populist appeals, and emotionally charged narratives. Additionally, we systematically assessed the nature of voter interactions, examining whether Facebook functioned as a space for deliberative democratic engagement or whether it reinforced ideological polarization and entrenched partisan divisions.

## Findings

### Policy-Oriented Content

The analysis of the candidates' Facebook posts between June 1 and June 7, 2024, reveals significant differences in the extent to which their messages were policy-oriented. Nicușor Dan displayed the most structured and fact-based communication, emphasizing governance strategies and urban development projects and demonstrated the most consistent use of fact-based, structured communication. His posts frequently detailed public investments in infrastructure and urban development, such as the rehabilitation of tramway line 5, the modernization of the heating network, and the prevention of illegal constructions. In one such post, he announced: we are rehabilitating tramway line 5 and upgrading the heating system in several neighborhoods. European funds are allocated and each technical stage is monitored.”.

This type of messaging, rich in institutional and technical language, stood in sharp contrast with emotionally charged or populist slogans. Another post emphasized his governance focus: “Work on the heating network is progressing according to schedule. We are continuing the initiated projects”. These examples illustrate a discursive strategy rooted in public accountability and structured planning. Emotional content was minimal and context-specific. Posts marking symbolic occasions, such as Children’s Day, included simple acknowledgements: “Happy Children’s Day! May your day be full of smiles!”, but such expressions remained peripheral to the core campaign messaging.

In contrast to Nicușor Dan’s highly structured and policy-centered approach, Gabriela Firea combined vague references to governance experience with emotionally resonant appeals. While she frequently cited past achievements in healthcare and infrastructure, such as the construction of medical units or support for families, these mentions were typically broad and lacked detailed implementation plans or timelines. Few posts provided concrete policy updates or budgetary data, limiting their contribution to deliberative public discourse.

Instead, Firea’s communication was heavily oriented toward emotional connection and community mobilization. Her posts often used warm, empathic language and symbolic expressions of unity. For example, in one post she wrote: “Family is our balance, it is our soul ❤️ [...] Happy anniversary, wonderful family!”. This emotionally charged message illustrates how personal values and affective themes were central to her digital rhetoric.

Supporter engagement echoed this tone through affirmations like “Good luck with everything you set out to do! 🙏❤️” or simply “❤️❤️❤️”, reinforcing the emotive register of her communication. These interactions contributed to a campaign atmosphere shaped more by symbolic belonging than by deliberative, policy-oriented discussion.

As a result, Firea’s campaign discourse displayed a moderate level of policy content but was dominated by emotionally evocative appeals that resonated deeply with her audience and prioritized collective identification over technical specificity.



Cristian Popescu-Piedone adopted a markedly different communicative approach, relying heavily on personal credibility and emotional bonding rather than structured policy communication. His posts centered on his image as an experienced doer, often showcasing localized urban achievements such as the renovation of *Parcul Sebastian* or initiatives in social housing. However, these references were largely declarative and lacked supporting data, timelines, or references to administrative frameworks.

Unlike Nicușor Dan’s institutional focus or Firea’s collective appeals, Piedone’s discourse revolved around his personal strength and the trust of “the people.” Governance was portrayed not as a coordinated system, but as the result of individual will and dedication. This personalization was strongly reinforced through emotionally charged supporter comments, such as “*The ultimate boss!!*” focusing admiration not on programmatic content, but on perceived character and charisma.

The overall tone of his campaign was celebratory, informal, and affectively rich. His posts were frequently accompanied by emojis such as 💪 (strength), ❤️ (support), and 🤝 (trust). Supporters responded in kind, with comments like “Respect, Mr. Mayor! 💪👏”, “We’re with you until the end! ❤️👏”, or simply strings of emojis like “💪❤️👏👏”. These interactions emphasized loyalty, emotional intensity, and personal admiration over policy deliberation.

Rather than inviting detailed engagement with public policy, Piedone’s campaign cultivated a digital space centered on affective affirmation and symbolic belonging. This highly emotionalized communication style, although effective in mobilizing a core electorate, contributed to the personalization and polarization of online discourse.

The table provides a comparative overview of the communication strategies employed by the three main candidates—Nicușor Dan, Gabriela Firea, and Cristian Popescu-Piedone—during the final week of the 2024 local elections in Bucharest.

Table 3: Campaign Messaging Styles and the Role of Criticism in Digital Political Communication

Candidate	Intensity	Tone	Main Target	Typical Example	Function of Criticism
Nicușor Dan	Low	Reserved, policy-focused	Institutional inefficiency and systemic issues	The real estate mafia is a result of years of complicity between politicians and speculators.	Policy contrasts and legitimacy through institutional reform
Gabriela Firea	Moderate	Confrontational but within administrative scope	Nicușor Dan’s current term as mayor	The city has been left in ruin. People suffer while promises are broken.	Personal differentiation and record comparison
Cristian Popescu-Piedone	High	Aggressive, sarcastic, anti-elite	Entire political class, anonymous elites	I don’t lie, I build. They sit in offices, I get things done. Clowns in suits!	Populist polarization and identity building



## **Negative Campaigning**

The role of negative campaigning varied significantly across candidates, both in tone and in strategic intent.

**Nicușor Dan** maintained a relatively restrained approach to criticism, focusing primarily on institutional inefficiencies and inherited structural problems. While he occasionally referred to issues such as the “real estate mafia” or obstructed urban projects, these references were framed within a broader discourse of administrative reform rather than direct personal attacks. Notably, explicit negative rhetoric rarely originated from the candidate himself. However, user-generated content on his Facebook page frequently adopted a more confrontational tone, targeting his main opponents with sarcasm or derision. For instance, one supporter wrote: “Now I’ll grab some popcorn and wait to see which of his buddies Piedone brings along”, ridiculing the candidate’s perceived associations. Another commenter wrote: “Next time, take Cristian Popescu Piedone with you—maybe there’s no one left to wipe the board. INFRASTRUCTURE RECEPTION!!”, suggesting incompetence through irony. A third post stated: “You should’ve taken Ciolacu along with Firea”, implying a political alliance framed in ridicule. These examples suggest that, even if not directly promoted by Dan’s team, the digital environment around his campaign facilitated an undercurrent of oppositional rhetoric.

**Gabriela Firea**, by contrast, employed a more direct and structured form of negative campaigning. Her messaging consistently emphasized the shortcomings of Bucharest’s current administration—highlighting stalled infrastructure, urban degradation, and poor service delivery. Although her posts rarely named Nicușor Dan directly, she often referenced “the current mayor” or contrasted her own tenure with “the last four years,” invoking a narrative of administrative regression.

In numerous posts, Firea underscored her past achievements—such as opening medical facilities or supporting families—while lamenting their current neglect. For example, she invoked the “chaos on construction sites” or claimed that “nothing is working anymore”, framing the current state of the city as evidence of her successor’s failure. This comparative strategy implicitly discredited her opponent while reaffirming her leadership capabilities.

**Cristian Popescu-Piedone** adopted the most openly confrontational and populist tone among the three candidates. His posts often blended personal pride with sarcasm, appeals to the “common people,” and a clear rejection of the political establishment. Through recurring slogans like “I don’t lie, I build” and “They sit in offices, I work in the streets”, he projected an image of moral superiority and practical competence, contrasting himself with what he portrayed as a passive or corrupt elite.

Although many comments on his page were admiring and enthusiastic, some also echoed this combative style. A user criticized the broader political class by stating: “They’ve all been saying the same for more than 30 years 😊☀️👍👊”, expressing frustration with empty political rhetoric. Another user commented: “Just big promises and small achievements”, reinforcing a key populist narrative of political failure. Even

those supportive of Piedone tended to frame their admiration in contrast with general political inefficacy: “If only someone did in my town what you’re doing... it’s a shame that there are so many resources and no one to manage them”.

Such comments, amplified by Piedone’s own style, contributed to a discourse shaped by personal loyalty, populist contrast, and implicit delegitimization of traditional political actors. Nearly every message reinforced a moral dichotomy between a capable, action-oriented “us” and an inefficient, disconnected “them.” This rhetorical strategy fueled both emotional engagement and a strongly polarized atmosphere in his campaign.

In sum, the intensity and nature of negative campaigning differed not only by candidate, but also by the degree of control over their digital communities. While some attacks were strategic and candidate-driven, others emerged organically from emotionally invested supporters, shaping the broader campaign narrative in often unpredictable ways.

The table below synthesizes the differences in tone, target, and rhetorical function of negative campaigning across the three candidates. While Nicușor Dan maintained a technocratic and restrained style, Gabriela Firea emphasized comparative blame, and Cristian Popescu-Piedone adopted a populist, polarizing narrative centered on moral contrast and confrontation.

Table 4: The Rhetoric of Opposition: Negative Campaigning in the 2024 Bucharest Elections

Candidate	Negative Tone	Target of Criticism	Typical Expression	Source of Negativity	Polarization Level
Nicușor Dan	Subtle and policy-based	Institutional inefficiency, past mismanagement	The real estate mafia is the result of collusion between politicians and speculators.	Supporter comments with ironic tone and mockery	Low to moderate
Gabriela Firea	Direct and comparative	Current administration (implicitly Nicușor Dan)	Nothing works in Bucharest anymore!	Candidate’s posts contrasting her own mandate	Moderate
Cristian Popescu-Piedone	Confrontational and sarcastic	Political class and opponents (implicitly and explicitly)	I don’t lie, I build. They sit in offices, I work in the streets.	Both candidate and supporters through slogans and moral rejection	High

## **Use of Populist Rhetoric**

The degree of populist rhetoric represented another key point of differentiation among the candidates.

**Nicușor Dan** employed very limited populist framing. While he addressed issues such as inefficiency or corruption, his discourse remained grounded in institutional reform, urban governance, and transparency. His campaign avoided simplistic binaries like “the people” versus “the elite,” favoring a technocratic tone that emphasized data, planning, and administrative competence.

**Gabriela Firea**, meanwhile, made occasional use of populist elements, particularly in her calls for civic unity and emotional engagement. Her statement “Together we can make Bucharest the city people dream of” exemplifies a collaborative and inclusive tone—positioning herself as an ally of ordinary citizens. Still, she generally refrained from direct attacks on elites or explicit moral dichotomies, keeping her populist rhetoric relatively moderate.

**Cristian Popescu-Piedone** stood out as the candidate who most consistently employed populist themes. His rhetoric portrayed him as a man of the people—authentic, self-made, and in stark opposition to a disconnected and corrupt political class. He frequently referred to “good people” and described himself as someone who “works in the streets” while others “sit in offices”, reinforcing a strong “us vs. them” dynamic.

This populist positioning was echoed and amplified by his followers. In one comment, a supporter lamented political inaction, expressing deep skepticism toward traditional political actors. Another user criticized Romania’s intellectual elite in dramatic terms: “These stupid politicians have done nothing... the intellectual class has always generated corruption, manipulation, and diversion.”. Elsewhere, the community expressed collective support using emotionally resonant phrases like “God help us, good people”, anchoring the campaign in shared moral identity and spiritual symbolism.

In sum, while all candidates sought connection with voters, only Piedone framed that connection within a sustained populist narrative—centered on personal authenticity, anti-elitism, and a binary moral world.

The table below synthesizes the use of populist rhetoric in the Facebook communication strategies of the three candidates. It highlights the intensity, narrative framing, language choices, and audience responses that differentiate their approaches.

Table 5: Populist Framing and Voter Resonance in Candidate Facebook Discourse

Candidate	Populist Intensity	Core Narrative	Typical Expression	Audience Echo	Example from Comments
Nicușor Dan	Low	Technocratic competence, institutional reform	We allocated 15 million lei for thermal system modernization.	Rational comments focused on governance outcomes	—
Gabriela Firea	Moderate	Unity and collective action against dysfunction	Together we can make Bucharest the city people dream of.	Supportive reactions framed as collective belonging	"Congratulations on all your projects! 🥰"
Cristian Popescu-Piedone	High	Moral struggle of the 'good people' against corrupt elites	I don't lie, I build. They sit in offices, I work in the streets.	Emotive support, anti-elite slogans, and spiritual appeals	"They've all been saying the same thing for over 30 years 😊 🌞👍🙌" / "God help us, good people"

### Fact-Based vs. Emotional Appeals

One of the most striking differences among the candidates was the degree to which their communication relied on factual reasoning versus emotional engagement.

**Nicușor Dan** maintained a predominantly fact-based, technocratic tone. His posts often referenced investment figures, infrastructure projects, or policy tools aimed at increasing transparency and efficiency. For instance, one supporter commented: "Wonderful! 🥰 I first heard the term 'participatory budgeting' from the mayor of Timișoara, Dominic Fritz! This is what respect for citizens looks like! Congratulations, from the bottom of my heart! Bucharest is getting better! 🙌👍🙌." This type of discourse suggests an alignment between Dan's own messaging and his audience's interest in governance mechanisms and civic participation.

**Gabriela Firea**, in contrast, drew heavily on emotional language to build solidarity and reinforce her image as a caring and responsive leader. Her posts were frequently accompanied by expressions of gratitude and symbolic gestures. A typical reaction from her audience reads: "🙌🙌🙌❤️." These emotional affirmations, though brief, illustrate how Firea's audience connected with her campaign more through affect than argument, reinforcing her focus on relational politics rather than technical detail.

**Cristian Popescu-Piedone** employed the most emotionally charged language of all three. His campaign evoked loyalty, resilience, and a sense of belonging. For example, one fervent supporter declared: "PIEDONE, GENERAL MAYOR OF THE CAPITAL 🙌❤️🍀👍." This emotionally saturated post, adorned with emojis

Table 6: Fact-Based Reasoning vs. Emotional Engagement: A Comparative Overview

Candidate	Communication Focus	Example Expression	Emotional Intensity	Engagement Type
Nicușor Dan	Data-driven, institutional, technocratic	Wonderful! 🥰 [...] participatory budgeting [...] Congratulations, from the bottom of my heart! 🙏🏻👊🏻💡	Low	Policy-oriented approval and civic discourse
Gabriela Firea	Emotional bonding, gratitude, unity	🙏🏻🙏🏻🙏🏻❤️	Moderate to High	Affective support, symbolic affirmation
Cristian Popescu-Piedone	Intense emotional loyalty, personal struggle	PIEDONE, GENERAL MAYOR OF THE CAPITAL 🙏🏻❤️🍀👍	High	Charismatic celebration, national pride

The intensity and nature of audience engagement varied significantly across the three candidates, mirroring the rhetorical tone and stylistic choices of their campaigns.

**Nicușor Dan** maintained a consistent yet moderate level of interaction. His fact-based and institutional communication attracted comments from citizens who valued structured, pragmatic dialogue. Supporters often responded with informed appreciation or thoughtful questions; such responses illustrate how rational discourse can still generate emotionally positive—but content-rich—engagement.

**Gabriela Firea** drew higher engagement rates, fueled by her emotionally oriented content and relatable tone. Many of her posts received symbolic gestures of support and expressions of encouragement, often brief but affectively loaded. These emotive responses, often accompanied by emojis, reflect her ability to foster closeness and affinity among followers, even in the absence of detailed policy dialogue.

**Cristian Popescu-Piedone** inspired the highest levels of engagement, often marked by enthusiastic repetition, symbolic affirmation, and charismatic praise. His supporters expressed loyalty with vibrant, personal declarations, emotionally rich messages, filled with capital letters, exclamation points, and affectionate language,

exemplifying the intense, almost celebratory nature of Piedone’s digital community.

In summary, the level of engagement was shaped not only by the content of the messages, but also by the emotional register and relational dynamics that each candidate cultivated with their audience—whether through policy discussion, personal empathy, or charismatic identification.

The table below compares the levels and styles of audience engagement across the three candidates. It highlights the volume, tone, and emotional resonance of voter responses in reaction to each candidate’s communication strategy.

Table 7: Comparative Levels and Emotional Dynamics of Audience Engagement on Facebook

Candidate	Engagement Volume	Style of Interaction	Example Comment	Emotional Intensity
Nicușor Dan	Moderate	Informative, policy-oriented comments	Wonderful! [...] participatory budgeting [...] Congratulations, from the bottom of my heart! 🙏👏	Low to Moderate
Gabriela Firea	High	Affective reactions, encouragement, emojis	Good luck! 🙏❤️👍❤️❤️	Moderate to High
Cristian Popescu-Piedone	Very High	Charismatic praise, intense loyalty, celebration	Congratulations and best of luck! YOU’RE GOING TO HAVE A WONDERFUL EVENING [...]❤️🙏😊	Very High

### Diversity of Interactions

A key indicator of democratic deliberation in online spaces is the presence of diverse interactions—comments that reflect not just affirmation but also questioning, critique, or dialogue across perspectives.

**Nicușor Dan’s** Facebook posts demonstrated the highest level of conversational diversity. While many followers expressed support, others engaged in critical reflection or policy-based suggestions. For instance, one user wrote: *“Bravo! The project must be extended to ALL the streets and boulevards of the capital, which suffer from a lack of trees [...] If you take these aspects into account and act accordingly, the trees will survive; if not, they won’t, and public money will be wasted again.”* This comment combines endorsement with constructive criticism, reflecting both concern for policy outcomes and a willingness to hold the candidate accountable.

**Gabriela Firea’s** comment sections, by contrast, were more ideologically aligned. The dominant tone was supportive and affirming, with few visible counterpoints. One typical comment reads: *“Good luck, Mrs. Gabriela Firea! The one currently sitting in the mayor’s chair lives in a universe disconnected from reality. Surely the people of Bucharest will vote for you. 🙏🙏🙏”*. Here the emphasis is on reinforcing Firea’s legitimacy while discrediting the opponent, with little room for

nuanced debate or critique.

**Cristian Popescu-Piedone's** comments reflected the lowest diversity. His posts generated a flood of enthusiastic and loyal affirmations, with virtually no dissent. Such declarations, emotionally saturated and often accompanied by nationalistic and spiritual emojis, suggest a strong echo chamber, where followers repeat campaign slogans and reinforce each other's views, rather than engaging in deliberation.

In short, while all three candidates mobilized supportive communities, Nicușor Dan's digital space stood out as the most deliberative, Firea's as emotionally unified, and Piedone's as intensely loyal but ideologically closed. The table below illustrates the variation in interaction quality across the three candidates' comment sections. It highlights the presence or absence of debate, counterarguments, and echo chamber effects.

Table 8: Deliberative Potential of Facebook Discussions: A Comparative Overview

Candidate	Interaction Type	Example Comment	Deliberative Quality
Nicușor Dan	Diverse, with critical and constructive comments	Bravo! The project must be extended [...] If you take these aspects into account and act accordingly, the trees will survive; if not, they won't [...]	High
Gabriela Firea	Partisan support with limited counterarguments	Good luck, Mrs. Gabriela Firea! [...] Surely the people of Bucharest will vote for you.	Moderate
Cristian Popescu-Piedone	Echo chamber with uniform, loyal affirmations	PIEDONE, GENERAL MAYOR OF THE CAPITAL 🙏❤️🍀👍	Low

### Incivility and Polarization

An important final indicator in evaluating the democratic quality of online political discourse is the presence of incivility and ideological polarization.

**Nicușor Dan's** comment space, by contrast, was the most civil. Users responded with appreciation, thoughtful critique, and policy-oriented suggestions, without resorting to personal attacks. A representative example is: "*Wonderful! 🥰 [...] participatory budgeting [...] Congratulations, from the bottom of my heart! 🙏👏*". This reflects a more respectful tone, focused on institutional innovation and civic engagement.

**Gabriela Firea's** comments also contained instances of incivility, though less frequent. Occasionally, supporters resorted to inflammatory language, particularly when referring to her adversaries. One such comment reads: "*LIARS, you bunch of LIARS led by GABRIELA FIREA! BOOOO, SHAME of the Romanian nation!*". Although emotionally expressive, such discourse detracts from constructive debate and contributes to a climate of antagonism.



**Cristian Popescu-Piedone's** posts attracted the highest concentration of hostile and toxic comments. Users frequently expressed contempt toward political opponents using aggressive language and exclusionary metaphors. For example, one supporter wrote: *“There’s nothing left but for you to win the elections, Mr. Mayor, by a crushing score — I’m 100% sure it will happen! [...] You need to clean up this mess, in plain Romanian: throw the trash in the dumpster, where it belongs.”* This metaphorical framing of political opponents as “trash” exemplifies the hostile tone and polarizing narrative often present in Piedone’s comment section.

Taken together, these examples highlight how Facebook functioned not only as a platform for political mobilization but also as a space where ideological rigidity and incivility could flourish—particularly within the digital communities of Piedone and, to a lesser extent, Firea.

The table below summarizes the tone and level of polarization observed in user comments on the candidates’ Facebook pages. It includes examples that illustrate the varying degrees of hostility, incivility, and ideological rigidity across the campaigns.

Table 9: Incivility and Ideological Polarization in Facebook Comment Sections

Candidate	Tone of Comments	Example Comment	Polarization Level
Nicușor Dan	Respectful, civic, focused on policy	Wonderful! [...] participatory budgeting [...] Congratulations, from the bottom of my heart!	Low
Gabriela Firea	Occasional hostility, emotionally charged critique	LIARS [...] SHAME of the Romanian nation!	Moderate
Cristian Popescu-Piedone	High incivility, polarizing and aggressive tone	[...] throw the trash in the dumpster, where it belongs	High

### Voter Engagement and the Nature of Online Discourse

The distribution of comment types across the Facebook pages of the three candidates—Nicușor Dan, Gabriela Firea, and Cristian Popescu-Piedone—reveals significant variation in voter engagement and the deliberative potential of each digital community.

Nicușor Dan’s page displayed the highest proportion of constructive comments (13%) and the lowest percentage of incivility (3%), suggesting a comparatively healthier online environment for civic dialogue. While partisan comments were present (7%), they were significantly outnumbered by neutral or affective messages (77%), which often conveyed appreciation or symbolic support without aggressive polarization. The diversity of interactions on his page was high, and the overall deliberative quality of the discussion can be classified as moderate—an indicator of the technocratic and policy-driven tone of his campaign.

In contrast, Gabriela Firea's community was marked by a stronger presence of partisan reinforcement (28%) and a notable level of incivility (10%). Constructive contributions were limited (6%), and most comments (56%) were affective in nature, reflecting emotional engagement more than critical evaluation. Comment diversity was moderate, and the deliberative quality remained relatively low. This pattern aligns with her campaign strategy, which blended governance references with emotionally charged appeals and community-oriented symbolism.

Cristian Popescu-Piedone's digital space was the most polarized and emotionally saturated. While constructive input was minimal (3%), his page hosted a high volume of partisan (44%) and uncivil (22%) comments. These interactions often took the form of slogans, declarations of loyalty, or disparagement of political opponents. Neutral or affective comments constituted only 31%, indicating a dominant tone of ideological rigidity. Accordingly, the level of comment diversity was low, and the deliberative quality of the discussion was very low. This pattern confirms the populist and confrontational tone of his communication style, which invited emotional affirmation and moral dichotomies rather than reflective dialogue.

Together, these findings illustrate how different campaign strategies shaped not only the content of political messaging but also the quality of public discourse around it. While all candidates mobilized active supporter communities, only Nicușor Dan's platform fostered a relatively deliberative environment, whereas Firea's and especially Piedone's campaigns encouraged emotional alignment and partisan consolidation.

### **Implications for Democratic Deliberation**

The findings suggest that, in the context of the 2024 Bucharest local elections, Facebook functioned more as a platform for political mobilization than as a space for deliberative democracy. The prevalence of negative campaigning, populist rhetoric, and emotionally charged content indicates that social media may reinforce ideological divides rather than fostering rational discourse and democratic deliberation. This trend aligns with global observations where social media platforms, while enhancing accessibility, also contribute to the fragmentation of public discourse and the amplification of extreme viewpoints.

This process, which we propose to call *deliberative disintegration*, describes the gradual erosion of democratic dialogue in favor of emotionally charged, adversarial, and populist exchanges. Rather than encouraging informed discussion across perspectives, online platforms tend to promote homogeneity within ideological groups and antagonism across them, thereby diminishing the potential for mutual understanding and civic reasoning. In this context, although Facebook amplifies visibility and facilitates interaction, it often undermines the deliberative function that is essential to the health of democratic processes.

Deliberative disintegration thus captures the paradox of digital political engagement: while more people than ever participate in public discourse, the quality of that participation is increasingly shaped by affective polarization and

rhetorical simplification. The concept invites future research into how technological infrastructures and platform logics might be restructured to better serve democratic deliberation rather than erode it.

### **Final Insights: Campaign Voices and Voter Echoes Online**

This study set out to examine whether Facebook functioned as a space for democratic deliberation during the 2024 local elections in Bucharest, focusing on both the communication strategies of the three main candidates—Nicușor Dan, Gabriela Firea, and Cristian Popescu-Piedone—and the patterns of audience engagement on their official pages.

In relation to RQ1, the findings reveal important differences in campaign discourse. Nicușor Dan adopted a technocratic and fact-based communication style that emphasized institutional responsibility, transparency, and urban governance. His posts included detailed references to budgets, project timelines, and infrastructure investments, reflecting a high alignment with the norms of deliberative democracy. Gabriela Firea, by contrast, blended appeals to past achievements with emotionally charged language aimed at fostering unity and trust. Her communication focused more on symbolic connection than on policy elaboration. Cristian Popescu-Piedone advanced a distinctly populist narrative, framing governance as a personal mission rooted in moral superiority and antagonism toward political elites. His campaign largely eschewed institutional language, favoring direct slogans, emotive self-positioning, and strong personalization.

In response to RQ2, the nature of audience interaction mirrored the candidates' rhetorical styles. Dan's followers engaged in moderately frequent, largely civil, and occasionally critical discussions, often focused on policy substance. Firea's supporters responded with emotionally affirming messages but showed less openness to debate or dissent. Piedone's digital community exhibited the highest levels of enthusiasm but also the most intense polarization, with frequent instances of incivility and ideologically rigid support. These patterns indicate that while Facebook enabled visibility and participation, it more often amplified affective resonance and group identity than it fostered meaningful deliberation.

Importantly, these findings should be interpreted considering the electoral outcome: Nicușor Dan's victory suggests that fact-based and institutionally grounded communication may still resonate with a substantial portion of the urban electorate. However, it also underscores the fragmented nature of the public sphere, in which emotional and populist narratives can attract intense support without necessarily fostering democratic discourse.

In sum, although traces of deliberative engagement were present—especially in Dan's campaign—social media remained predominantly a space for partisan affirmation, emotional alignment, and rhetorical polarization, particularly within the digital communities surrounding Firea and Piedone.

## Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into the dynamics of political communication and voter engagement on Facebook during the 2024 Bucharest local elections, it is subject to several limitations. The analysis focuses exclusively on public posts and comments from candidates' official pages, thereby excluding private messages, group interactions, or paid promotional content that may have influenced public perception. Additionally, the study is geographically and temporally bounded, limiting the generalizability of the findings beyond the urban Romanian context and the final week of the campaign. Future research could expand the scope by incorporating cross-platform comparisons, longitudinal data, or interviews with users to better understand the motivations and perceptions behind online political behavior.

## Future Research and Considerations

Future research should investigate how platform design, moderation policies, and algorithmic incentives contribute to the dynamics of deliberative disintegration. Understanding the role of technological architecture in shaping affective engagement and rhetorical framing is essential for developing interventions that could mitigate ideological rigidity and enhance deliberative quality. Moreover, cross-national comparative studies could offer insight into how different electoral systems, media environments, and civic cultures interact with social media to either reinforce or resist the disintegration of deliberation. Such studies would help identify the conditions under which digital platforms might support democratic discourse rather than corrode it.

Although Nicușor Dan's policy-centric strategy generated only moderate levels of engagement online, it is significant that he won re-election with approximately 48% of the vote. This suggests that while online popularity often amplifies visibility, it does not automatically translate into electoral success. Offline factors—such as governance records, public trust, and traditional media coverage—remain crucial in shaping voter preferences.

These findings open important avenues for further research on the disconnect between digital visibility and democratic legitimacy. In particular, scholars should explore how emotional intensity and algorithmic amplification affect voter perceptions, and how platforms might be redesigned to support deliberative resilience in future campaigns.

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## **Društvene mreže i deliberativna dezintegracija političke komunikacije: Dinamika odnosa građana i kandidata na Fejsbuku tokom izbornih kampanja**

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### **Apstrakt**

Ova studija istražuje dinamiku komunikacije između građana i kandidata na Fejsbuku tokom lokalnih izbora 2024. godine u Bukureštu, sa fokusom na to kako digitalne platforme oblikuju politički diskurs i građanski angažman. Korišćenjem analize sadržaja, razmatraju se strategije kampanje troje glavnih kandidata—Nicușor Dan, Gabriela Firea i Cristian Popescu-Piedone—s posebnim osvrtom na obrasce uokvirivanja politika, negativne kampanje, populističke retorike i odnos između emocionalnih i činjeničnih poruka. Paralelno se analizira i interakcija birača, procenjujući intenzitet angažovanja, raznolikost diskursa, neuljudnost i ideološku polarizaciju. Nalazi pokazuju da Fejsbuk, umesto da podstakne inkluzivnu deliberaciju, deluje kao katalizator deliberativne dezintegracije, pojačavajući fragmentaciju, učvršćujući echo komore i podrivajući demokratsku otpornost. Rezultati postavljaju važna pitanja o ulozi platforme u oblikovanju javnog diskursa i kvalitetu izborne komunikacije u algoritamski kuriranim okruženjima.

*Ključne reči:* afektivna polarizacija, deliberativna dezintegracija, nepristojnost na internetu, politička komunikacija na Fejsbuku, populistička retorika.

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