Social Media Usage in 'No Man's Land': A Populist Paradise

Authors : Nilufer Turksoy

Abstract : Social media tools successfully connect people from different milieu to each other. This easy access allows politicians with populist attitude to circulate any kind of political opinion or message, which will hardly appear in conventional media. Populism is a relevant concept, especially, in political communication research. In the last decade, populism in social media has been researched extensively. The present study focuses on how social media is used as a playground by Turkish Cypriot politicians to perform populism in Northern Cyprus. It aims to determine and understand the relationship between politicians and social media, and how they employ social media in their political lives. Northern Cyprus's multi-faced character provides politicians with many possible frames and topics they can make demagogy about ongoing political deadlock, international isolation, economic instability or social and cultural life in the north part of the island. Thus, Northern Cyprus, bizarrely branded as a 'no man's land', is a case par excellence to show how politically and economically unstable geographies are inclined to perform populism. Northern Cyprus is legally invalid territory recognized by no member of the international community other than Turkey and a phantom state, just like Abkhazia and South Ossetia or Nagorno-Karabakh. Five ideological key elements of populism are employed in the theoretical framework of this study: (1) highlighting the sovereignty of the people, (2) attacking the elites, (3) advocacy for the people, (4) excluding others, and (5) invoking the heartland. A qualitative text analysis of typical Facebook posts was conducted. Profiles of popular political leaders who occupy top positions (e.g. member of parliament, minister, chairman, party secretary), who have different political views, and who use their profiles for political expression on daily bases are selected. All official Facebook pages of the selected politicians are examined during a period of five months (1 September 2017-31 January 2018). This period is selected since it was prior to the parliamentary elections. Finding revealed that majority of the Turkish Cypriot politicians use their social media profile to propagate their political ideology in a populist fashion. Populist statements are found across parties. Facebook give especially the left-wing political actors the freedom to spread their messages in manipulative ways, mostly by using a satiric, ironic and slandering jargon that refers to the pseudo-state, the phantom state, the unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus state. While most of the political leaders advocate for the people, invoking the heartland are preferred by right-wing politicians. A broad range of left-wing politicians predominantly conducted attack on the economic elites and ostracism of others. The finding concluded that different politicians use social media differently according to their political standpoint. Overall, the study offers a thorough analysis of populism on social media. Considering the large role social media plays in the daily life today, the finding will shed some light on the political influence of social media and the social media usage among politicians.

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