

PROOF

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The Seducer's Net: Internet, Politics and Seduction

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Bulgarian election campaign 2009: Jocular drama in two acts

Lorenzo Da Ponte's famous libretto of the opera *Don Giovanni* is billed as 'jocular drama', a term that denotes a mixing of serious and comic action. The first act starts with the murder of the Commendatore and the triumph of the seducer. The trickster from Seville is let loose, rejoicing in his absolute freedom to have fun, to charm women and explore the ultimate irony of life. Act Two ends with the appearance of the marble statue of the Commendatore, which grabs Don Giovanni by the hand and sinks into the earth with him. The storyline described in such a simplified way might serve as a good allegory for the Bulgarian 2009 parliamentary election campaign on the Internet.

The beginning of the campaign was marked by a prophetic and exuberant depiction of social media, which were expected to 'kill' the old style top-down authoritative politics. Freedom of expression, grassroots initiatives and civic participation were to be encouraged, following in the footsteps of the successful campaign of Barack Obama. As the elections approached however a different picture emerged – a picture of irony, Balkanization of the online debates and general lack of interest in the specific political programmes of the parties. Instead of fostering democratization the social media served mainly to consolidate a nationalist populist discourse. What is more, the parties that invested the most in online activity were the ones that performed relatively badly in the elections in comparison to previous years. That does not mean of course that there is a direct causal relation between engagement with new media and poor election results. What can be inferred however is that the alternative political campaigns in social media did not have

1 a serious influence on the configuration of powers in the offline space
2 (Spasov, 2011).

3 Social media intertwined with politics in a complicated game of
4 seduction. Many politicians were seduced by the promises of Web
5 2.0, widely proclaimed by political advisers and media analysers, and
6 decided they should be up to date and create Facebook pages, video
7 clips and their own blogs in order to seduce the electorate. The Internet
8 users, on the other hand, were seduced by the possibility of feeling
9 politically engaged in radically new ways, which included irony, non-
10 sense and creative editing of videos. In the complex flux of desire and
11 mutual seduction however the painfully real problems of a divided
12 society emerged.

13 There is a general optimistic discourse around social media, which insists
14 on their potential for changing society (McRae, 2006). This discourse is
15 getting especially powerful and convincing after the revolution in Egypt.
16 What the present chapter aims to show in the particular context of the
17 Bulgarian elections is that the relation between social media and politi-
18 cal change is a bit more complicated and twofold just to begin with. The
19 digital Utopia cannot escape the firm hand of the offline social divisions
20 and problems. Behind the promises of easy freedom and instant social
21 gratification, there are real dangers of unleashing unexpected passions
22 for belonging and revenge. Don Juan is never innocent. His freedom can
23 be dangerous. The seduction of media does not happen in a bloodless,
24 imaginary, immaterial world. The Commendatore of old-style politics has
25 been killed only to reappear in the end and bring us back to earth.

26 The present chapter is a result of one-year-long monitoring of the
27 video sites YouTube and Vbox7.¹ The monitoring of video sites was part
28 of a bigger project for media monitoring,² whose first phase started in
29 January 2009 and ended in January 2010, thus covering the 12-month
30 period around the Bulgarian parliamentary elections from July 2009. The
31 project included monthly analyses by a joint team of young experts, cover-
32 ing a large field of different media – from radio and television to online
33 news editions, blogs, Facebook, Twitter and video sites. A social research
34 agency was engaged with the content analysis of printed press. The wide
35 range of the media monitoring enabled us to make comparisons between
36 the various spheres of research and to examine the interconnections and
37 cross-references between different media. In the particular case of video
38 sites the analysis was based on videos tagged under the category ‘poli-
39 tics’ in Vbox7 each month. The broadest possible criteria were chosen
40 in order to include videos with or about Bulgarian politicians, political
41 parties, external and internal Bulgarian policy. As there is no Bulgarian

1 version of YouTube and it was a challenge to find videos concerning
2 Bulgaria in the vast amount of material uploaded, the monitoring on
3 YouTube had a complementary function and focused on a set of formal
4 and informal channels of politicians and political parties. The analysis
5 combined quantitative and qualitative features. Stress was laid on view
6 count, comments and the content of the videos. Alternative uploads of
7 the same video by different people were also taken into account. The
8 long duration of the study allowed us to track repetitive uploads of the
9 same videos within months and observe the view count dynamics. Last
10 but not least, the monitoring helped us to observe the interconnections
11 between content taken from media and self-produced 'amateur' content.
12 In the following pages some key examples from the monitoring will be
13 considered.

14 15 **The seducer's net**

16
17 Before proceeding to videos from the election period, there is a specific
18 aesthetics of the video sites that must be addressed. Text has succumbed
19 to the seduction of image. There is no coherent narrative, no story to
20 be told, no predefined paths as to how to act on the site. Video sites
21 count on the alertness of the eye, on the readiness to be allured, tricked
22 and seduced. On video sites a horror of empty spaces is manifested – a
23 specific *terror vacui*. There should always be something to click on,
24 something to crystallize time. Video sites function as big seduction
25 machines with mechanisms for attracting the attention. A basic char-
26 acteristic of the Internet is the so-called constitutive distraction – a
27 remarkable concentration is needed in order to get where you want on
28 the Internet. The medium constantly distracts you with hyperlinks and
29 endless possibilities (Ditchev, 2004).

30 There is only one identity on video sites – that of Don Juan – a man
31 who walks down the street with a beautiful woman and yet looks at all
32 the other women passing by. Both seducing and seduced, internautes have
33 an almost erotic obsession with information and images. There is some-
34 thing profoundly similar between the image of Faust – the scholar yearn-
35 ing for knowledge, and Don Juan – the seducer yearning for pleasure.
36 In the age of the Internet the two figures have finally come together.
37 Knowledge and pleasure, melting in the promise of accessibility. Heaven
38 is always *there* – awaiting and accessible. The problem is that 'there' is
39 endlessly postponed, reflected in a mesmerizing *mise en abîme*. There is
40 no possibility of an island. Odysseus goes back to Ithaca only to con-
41 tinue travelling.

1 The users jump from video to video, from link to link. It is almost
2 like playing 'Dance Dance Revolution' – the dancers jump hectically,
3 quickly; they do their best trying to follow the arrows on the screen
4 of the machine. And it is always the machine with its electronic lights
5 that guides their movements. There are no random videos on the home
6 page of Vbox7 – the choice of the first editor, the choice of the second
7 editor, a sponsored video and then a list of videos which you might like,
8 because the system has learnt your preferences. In the very act of search-
9 ing for information-pleasure, users provide their own data. As Jean
10 Baudrillard notes, 'There is no active or passive mode in seduction, no
11 subject or object, no interior or exterior: seduction plays on both sides,
12 and there is no frontier separating them. One cannot seduce others, if
13 one has not oneself been seduced' (Baudrillard, 2001: 81). There is no
14 subject and no object – the users are one machine with the Net: desiring
15 machine. They can be seduced only as long as they seduce.

16 The sense of direction and purpose is sacrificed for the very pleasure
17 of gliding through the smooth space. As Hartmut Rosa suggests, 'the
18 dynamism of classical modernity, characterized by a strong sense of
19 direction (perceived as progress), is replaced by a sense of directionless,
20 frantic motion that is in fact a form of inertia' (Rosa, 2009: 101). The era
21 of the French Revolution was epitomized by the humane enlightened
22 guillotine. The era of YouTube is epitomized by the cheerful 'Dance
23 Dance Revolution'.

24 Reality is sliced into videos, short pieces of affect that can hardly
25 create a coherent worldview. The so-called brainwash that mainstream
26 media are often accused of is replaced by the explosion of truth. Instead
27 of being told what to think, the video subscriber is given bare facts,
28 pieces of puzzle without any hint how they might fit into a wider
29 picture. Video sites offer reality as it is but do not help us to interpret it.
30 So there is a big risk of succumbing again to the good old safe interpreta-
31 tions. A relevant example to clarify this point would be the scandalous
32 case of Boyko Borisov's 'Chicago statement'.³

34 The naked truth

36 Boyko Borisov, the now elected Prime Minister of Bulgaria, has enjoyed
37 a constant and remarkable popularity in Bulgarian media – both offline
38 and online. He started his career as a bodyguard of the late communist
39 leader Todor Zhivkov. Subsequently Borisov served as a bodyguard
40 to Tsar Simeon II,⁴ who returned after a long exile in Spain and was
41 elected Prime Minister. Borisov was the Chief Secretary of the Bulgarian

1 Ministry of Interior between 2001 and 2005; in 2005 he became the
2 mayor of Sofia; in 2006 he created the political party GERB, and in
3 2009 (the year this analysis concentrates on) GERB won convincingly
4 the parliamentary elections.⁵ The remarkable career of Borisov is often
5 explained in terms of his close-to-the-people charm, simple and down-
6 to-earth manner of speaking and strong media presence.

7 However a huge scandal threatened the perfect image of Borisov in
8 February 2009, just a few months before the elections. Speaking in
9 Chicago, he told Bulgarian expatriates that there was only low-quality
10 human material left in Bulgaria – one million gypsies, 700,000 Turks
11 and 2.5 million retirees. A huge social outrage condemned Borisov
12 for right-wing populism and nationalism. The video that leaked first
13 on YouTube became immensely popular and was widely commented.
14 A traditional account of the story would praise YouTube for its revela-
15 tory potential and show how even the most popular politician is no
16 longer almighty and safe. The problem with such an account is that it
17 totally misses the point.

18 Whereas the Chicago statement provoked moral indignation in many
19 television and newspapers discussions, it was precisely on YouTube and
20 Vbox7 where most of the people supported Borisov. If it weren't for
21 the comments, we could have believed the story of the revelatory and
22 democratic potential of social media. But the biggest revelation was that
23 most of the comments actually were in favour of Borisov. As the user
24 *hofi* said: 'what offence are you speaking about?!! He's totally right'. And
25 the user *snejka888* stated: 'that's why I support Borisov – he says the
26 truth without any problem' (Borisov, 2009). So what kind of truth does
27 this scandalous video reveal? Maybe that there is an upsurge of nation-
28 alism in a country that has traditionally prided itself in being extremely
29 ethnically and religiously tolerant?⁶ Instead of causing a political sui-
30 cide, the video from Chicago actually consolidated the national support
31 for Borisov. There was an attempt from the Bulgarian Socialist Party
32 (BSP) to use the statement in order to harm Borisov's reputation. In an
33 alternative video they combined his words with a video of a retiree ask-
34 ing 'Aren't you ashamed?' (Bad Human Material, 2009). However, again
35 the majority of the comments were in favour of Borisov.

36 'Perhaps we wish to uncover the truth because it is so difficult to
37 imagine it naked', Baudrillard suggests. What Borisov did was to name
38 a problem around which there has been a growing social consensus
39 in recent years. He was the one who dared to speak out an unspoken
40 'truth' and many people supported him. The revelatory scandalous
41 video had the relieving effect of shouting 'the emperor is naked' for the

1 online community. A fragment of reality was offered and the Vbox7
2 and YouTube users easily fitted it into a nationalist mode of interpreta-
3 tion that had already existed. If there were by any chance people who
4 were against the view expressed in the video, they were literally told to
5 'fuck off' in the comments by the dominant group of Borisov's support-
6 ers. Can we really continue proclaiming the democratizing potential of
7 social media in such a case?

8 9 **Clockwork media**

10
11 An indicative example of the dependence of social media on pre-existing
12 offline attitudes would be the 'Kochan statement'. It is an important case
13 as it can help us assess better the previously discussed Chicago state-
14 ment. Again it is all about a scandalous revelatory video. It is a speech
15 by Ahmed Dogan in a small village, called Kochan, that leaked just a
16 few weeks before the elections and triggered hitherto unseen online
17 mobilization to vote and consequently a remarkably high voter turnout.
18 Ahmed Dogan is the leader of DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms),
19 which in the collective imagination is strongly connected to Turkey.
20 Even though DPS is not an ethnic party, it represents the interests of
21 the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. In the video mentioned, Ahmed Dogan
22 states: 'the deputies have no power. ... It is me who rations the portions;
23 it is me who has the whole power in the country' (Dogan, 2009).

24 DPS was the third power in a triple coalition with Tsar Simeon's party
25 and the BSP. It was a rather unusual coalition imposed by the need to
26 form a stable government for the European Union (EU) accession of the
27 country. The coalition was based on many compromises and was strongly
28 discredited during its four years of governing. That is why Boyko Borisov
29 emerged as the main alternative. But maybe he wouldn't have achieved
30 such a convincing victory, were it not for the video with Ahmed Dogan's
31 statement. What it did was to literally inflame all the xenophobic nation-
32 alistic extreme right-wing (and not only) reactionary social energy.
33 Suddenly dozens of Facebook groups appeared that incited people
34 to vote against Dogan and the Turks. Dozens of videos appeared on
35 YouTube showing how Turks with dual citizenship came in huge buses
36 from Turkey just to vote (Buses from Turkey, 2009). What is more, there
37 was a constant suspicion of someone buying gypsies' votes. And the
38 pensioners were expected to vote for BSP out of nostalgia for the com-
39 munist past. The society was divided. The enemy was everywhere. That
40 is the reason why young active people using the Internet accepted as
41 their personal and patriotic task to promote voting. Young Bulgarians

1 had to vote against minorities and 'demented grannies'. It was not a
2 vote *for*, but a vote *against*. In the atmosphere of collective determina-
3 tion, Bulgarian Turks felt threatened and mobilized their electorate to
4 the maximum. That, on the other hand, provoked conspiracy theories
5 that Dogan leaked the video himself to mobilize his people.⁷

6 It won't be a matter of our discussion who leaked the video and
7 whether it was an elaborate political plan or not. What is remarkable
8 is that for the second time a video emerged from a politician's speech.
9 This time however there was no public support for the politician. The
10 'Chicago statement' made Borisov more popular, the 'Kochan state-
11 ment' made Dogan more unpopular. The videos did not actually change
12 anything in the overall political picture, but radicalized the forces and
13 exacerbated the social affects. In a thrilling real-life scenario, social
14 media actively helped to consolidate the nationalistic discourse and to
15 eliminate any possibility of a rational debate. Paradoxically, the media
16 of participation insisted on more people participating in the elections in
17 order to neutralize the minority votes and in fact exclude them.

18 As already mentioned, Borisov's party GERB won the elections. They
19 had to form a coalition and the party that supported them was the
20 extreme right-wing Ataka⁸ ('Attack'). What is especially important for
21 the present analysis is that Ataka was the most popular party on VBox7
22 for the period considered with considerable grassroots support. While
23 the party was under-represented in other media such as television and
24 printed press (apart from its own TV channel and newspaper), it was
25 immensely popular precisely on video sites. Short videos from the par-
26 ty's TV channel were uploaded and widely commented. The videos had
27 a very particular content, for example, the popular video about Turks
28 who beat up a boy at school (Turks beat up boy, 2009).

29 Social media turn out to be heaven for nationalists, who otherwise do
30 not have access to major media outlets. As Ivaylo Ditchchev convincingly
31 argues, nationalism appears to be an extremely popular online sub-
32 culture and a kind of sub-politics (Ditchchev, 2011). Actually, one of the
33 most popular genres on Vbox7 is nationalistic rap. There are songs with
34 names like 'Blood', 'Remember the Names', and so on. The song 'Blood'
35 (2009), for example takes us on a brief historical tour to commemorate
36 the five centuries of Ottoman yoke that Bulgaria experienced. The lyrics
37 go like this: 'Did you forget the pains, the chains and the blood? They
38 kill the faith, the culture, they bury Bulgaria. There is much pain and
39 hatred in my heart, and I see again our blood on their hands'. These dra-
40 matic lyrics are only a small extract of the whole nationalistic rhetoric.
41 Video sites in Bulgaria are violently conservative when it comes to

1 national dignity. 'Twenty-first century nationalism is different from its
2 earlier incarnations: it is not linked to solidarity or belonging, but to
3 appearances and emblems; not ethics, but aesthetics. You do not live it,
4 you have it, as Erich Fromm famously said. ... It is a lifestyle choice to
5 write emails in Cyrillic,⁹ to eat "Czar" pickles or listen to local folk-pop'
6 (Ditchev, 2006).

7 What unites social media and nationalism is the shared promise
8 of community. After the abrupt introduction of neoliberal policies in
9 Bulgaria after 1989, the mass privatization, and the disintegration of
10 social solidarity, social media and nationalism both promise to provide a
11 sense of belonging. The successful combination of social media and rad-
12 ical right discourse should not come as a surprise after all. In a modern
13 reminiscence of Benjamin (1936) we could claim that social media give
14 the masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves.
15 In the social network, far-right rhetoric replaces social rights.

17 The seduction of appearances

18
19 In the literary review *Two Ages*, Kierkegaard points out that in his own
20 sensible, reflective age any insurrection would seem ridiculous. Instead
21 a political virtuoso would issue invitations to a general meeting to
22 decide on a revolution. Then, on the 'evening of the meeting, he would
23 so skilfully create the illusion that they had made a revolution that eve-
24 ryone would go home quietly having passed a very pleasant evening'
25 (Kierkegaard, 1978: 253).

26 Something quite similar happened in January 2009 in Bulgaria.
27 A huge protest was organized online, via blogs, Facebook, Vbox7 and
28 YouTube in response to the murder of a young medical student in front
29 of a night club on the student campus of Sofia. The murder inflamed
30 the long-lasting public discontent with the privatization of the student
31 campus, which has been gradually turned into the Las Vegas of Sofia – a
32 place full of casinos and night clubs, where students can hardly concen-
33 trate on their studies. What started as a student protest movement was
34 soon supported by the mothers from the forum BG-Mamma (famous for
35 its civic activity), different ecological movements and even the farmers'
36 union. The protest was organized mainly through social networks and
37 was a result of the joint efforts of all the groups mentioned. It seemed
38 as if the multitude, as described by Hardt and Negri (Hardt and Negri,
39 2004), had come into existence. Everyone was excited, everyone wanted
40 to protest. The biggest question was to protest against what? The gov-
41 ernment seemed like a logical possibility. But the grieving students did

1 not want to be used politically six months before the elections. All they
2 wanted was to get the student campus back to the students and feel
3 secure in the place they live.¹⁰ Accordingly, the green movements had
4 their own agenda, not to mention the farmers. The dispersed organiza-
5 tion could not achieve united, coherent demands.

6 In the end, many people turned up to protest in front of the National
7 Assembly. There were posters, angry young men, fights with the
8 police – all the traditional elements of a protest. But the demonstrators
9 had no political programme, no idea what to change. It was a protest
10 for the sake of protest: a dramatic expression of emotion and of impo-
11 tence at the same time. Commenting on the French suburban riots of
12 autumn 2005, Slavoj Žižek notes that the most difficult thing to accept
13 is precisely the riots' meaninglessness: more than a form of protest, they
14 are what Lacan called a *passage à l'acte* – an impulsive movement into
15 action, which cannot be translated into speech or thought and carries
16 an intolerable weight of frustration. In a similar way, the Bulgarian
17 protests had above all a phatic function – something like 'hello, do you
18 hear me?', a testing both of the channel and of the code itself (Žižek,
19 2008: 76).

20 In the absence of a real political alternative, the organization of
21 the multitude could not bring any essential change. In a democratic
22 society with freely elected politicians, six months before the elections,
23 the protests from January 2009 revealed a deep crisis in political rep-
24 resentation. The political representation was replaced by social media
25 representation. The protests were the triumph of social media contem-
26 plating themselves and rejoicing in their endless possibilities. Bloggers
27 wrote from the place of action; people took pictures as fellow activists
28 were beaten up by the police and uploaded them instantly; messages
29 of indignation appeared on Facebook every three minutes. The biggest
30 success of the protest was the ability to provide alternative viewpoints.
31 The video *police violence in Bulgaria* (2009) attracted a large number of
32 views. But it seemed as if the whole energy of the protest was consumed
33 in commenting on it and in producing images.

34 A careful examination of all the videos from the protest reveals that
35 there is one constantly recurring element in all of them – the camera. In
36 a most telling video (Protest, 2009) a man is seen, his head covered with
37 blood. It is a very close shot and the viewers can hear confused and dis-
38 tant voices. At one point the cameraman steps back and we clearly see
39 a whole circle of people with cameras filming the injured man. No one
40 helps him. 'Go away with all those cameras!' – shouts the man – 'call
41 a doctor'. Social media can film but they can hardly heal. Blood has

1 become a mere image of blood. Protest – a mere image of protest. Only
2 a few of the protesters' proposals were considered by the government
3 and the election campaign continued smoothly towards the expected
4 outcome. There is a significant gap between providing an alternative
5 viewpoint and providing an alternative way to make politics.
6

7 **Death in elections**

8
9 The parties who invested the most in social media during the election
10 campaign were the BSP, The Right Coalition and the Greens. These
11 parties had different approaches but what united them was their faith
12 in Web 2.0 applications and the relatively large percentage of funds
13 invested in their online campaign compared to their overall budgets
14 (Spasov, 2011). If we accept that the Internet operates in the regime
15 of seduction, then certainly there are successful seducers and not so
16 successful ones. What is meant by seduction here is the playfulness
17 and irony of Web 2.0 aesthetics. One watches videos on YouTube not
18 because one has to, but because they are fun to watch. It is the user
19 who wants to see the video, so it has to attract her, to seduce her atten-
20 tion. Seduction is always unspoken – if it is pinpointed as seduction,
21 the game is lost. There is always an element of irony and uncertainty.
22 To expose the seduction means to ruin the magic of the game. And this
23 is what most of the politicians in Bulgaria did during the 2009 elec-
24 tion campaign. The official channels of most of the parties were full of
25 straightforward political messages like 'vote for me', video presentations
26 of different politicians with all their promises, and so on. Most of these
27 videos were the standard elections spots, taken from TV and uploaded
28 on Vbox7 and YouTube for free. Needless to say, most of these videos
29 never reached more than 50 views. The politicians did not care about
30 the response; there was no interactivity, no dialogue, and no interest in
31 the users' opinion.

32 In order to seduce one must be totally devoted to the seduced.
33 Successful seduction presupposes a good knowledge of the seduced and
34 a careful choice of the right moves. The direct attack rarely works. For
35 example, the BSP¹¹ tried to adopt the conventions of the Web, but they
36 did not take into account the prevailing mood in the Bulgarian online
37 space. The socialists produced a series of short satirical videos attacking
38 Boyko Borisov. The videos linked to a website with different amusing and
39 offensive games – for example, throwing an animated version of Boyko
40 Borisov into a dustbin. The black PR campaign had the exact opposite
41 effect than expected and provoked massive anti-campaigns by bloggers.

1 The cause of the failure was not that the campaign was offensive –
2 actually, The Right Coalition produced much more offensive videos.
3 But the Bulgarian online community is traditionally dominated by
4 right-wing activists¹² and is more receptive to messages coming from
5 the right. The socialists did not take this into account and their mas-
6 sive online campaign was almost suicidal. They did not know well
7 enough the ones they wanted to seduce and they were too direct in
8 their approach.

9 The big problem for most political parties in Bulgaria during the
10 2009 elections was that they showed little understating both of new
11 media and the local context. Seduction is always situational. There is
12 no universal formula how to do it. And most of the campaign strategists
13 actually thought they possessed such a formula. The story of Obama's
14 success was constantly retold during Bulgaria's parliamentary elections
15 and many politicians decided it was reasonable to have a Facebook
16 profile or a personal blog (the postings, of course, were written by some-
17 body else). Media researchers lured the campaign strategists with suc-
18 cessful stories from the West, and then the latter convinced politicians.
19 Traditional politics resembled the main character of Thomas Mann's
20 *Death in Venice*, who dyed his hair and put make-up on his face in order
21 to seduce an adolescent boy. But instead of attracting the young, the
22 parties that invested most in online campaigns 'died' in the elections,
23 or, in other words, they lost.

24 The most indicative fact is that even though The Right Coalition
25 conducted a very well received campaign by attracting many fellow
26 bloggers, creating a video site where the leader of the party answered
27 directly to questions from the people, and so on (Pavlov, 2011), the
28 Coalition's performance in the elections was rather poor compared to
29 the previous elections.¹³ That goes to show that even a successful online
30 campaign could not prevent the radical decline of the Coalition. And
31 the biggest disappointment in 2009 was the young and enthusiastic
32 Green Party, which counted almost exclusively on the online campaign
33 and collected less than 1 per cent of the votes.¹⁴

34 In a strange twist of irony, the most popular video of the 2009 election
35 campaign was a shabby, poor quality video in which a guy in a small
36 town captured on camera a porn scene, broadcast in the local office
37 of the Socialist Party (Porn in the headquarters, 2009). There is a good
38 explanation for this – one of the cable channels in Bulgaria switches to
39 porn after midnight. And the people working in the office had forgotten
40 that the television was switched on before they left. No matter what the
41 explanation is, this was the most popular video of the whole campaign.

Irony, nonsense and uselessness

The Internet blurs the distinction between what is important and what is not. It operates like the field glasses in the following fictional anecdote by Kierkegaard: a man standing on a bridge detects through his field glasses a little animal drowning in the water. The man takes off his clothes, jumps in the water, and rescues the creature. But a policeman comes along and arrests him for diving where it is prohibited. The hero then shows the little animal and explains that he ventured out in order to save it – the whole crowd that has gathered starts laughing at him, and the policeman fines him! The reason is that the animal is no bigger than a ladybug.

The situation described is very relevant to our modern day experience. We have lost any solid ground and the media, for all their technical sophistication, only serve to increase our loss of a coherent and balanced vision (Patisson, 2002: 45). We want to be active, we truly want to participate but we have lost the sense of what is really important. Irony lies in the mixing of scales – the large and the small, the serious and the funny. And in this regime of irony Boyko Borisov proved to be extremely successful. In the months preceding and following his election as Prime Minister Borisov became a true folk hero.

There are no jokes about Chuck Norris in Bulgaria because they have all been transformed into jokes about Borisov such as ‘there are only two types of women in this world – the ones who want to have sex with Boyko Borisov, and the ones who want to do it again’. A bit like the field glasses in the above mentioned anecdote, the video site aesthetics have shifted the focus from the political programme of GERB to the masculine, sexy image of Borisov. There are a number of pop-folk songs dedicated to him, including the hit ‘Triple coalition’ (2009) in which two blonde, voluptuous women express their wish to make ‘triple coalition’ with the Prime Minister. Songs like this, popular as they may be, distract the attention from more significant political issues.

Irony accounts for much more than what is normally meant by this concept. It is not just saying the opposite of what you mean. Irony is actually not to mean anything. You never stand behind your words. Nobody knows whether you are serious or not, therefore you cannot be reproached for not adhering to your statements (Kierkegaard, 1989). Irony is the broken connection between words and meaning, but more significantly between words and action. And by far irony is the dominating mode in contemporary politics.

For example, just a month after his ‘Chicago statement’, on 5 March 2009 Borisov claimed in a meeting with non-governmental organizations

(NGOs) that he intended to include representatives of the Roma ethnicity in all levels of government, including a potential minister. Boyko Borisov is not alone in making contradictory statements. Politics on a global scale becomes more and more like a broken puzzle. A politician says something. One month later she can say exactly the opposite. It seems like the world of politics increasingly resembles the architecture of video sites, where no coherent narrative can be found. In the place of overall strategy and long-term commitments a creative assemblage of small policy moves can be found.

The seducer meets the Commendatore

You have to be seduced in order to seduce. We are all enchanted by the game of seduction. But we forget that in every game there are winners and losers. The analysis in the book *Seduction* by Baudrillard focuses mainly on the very process of seduction but pays little attention to the fate of the victim. Kierkegaard himself in *The Seducer's Diary* wastes no more than a page to describe the end of the long seduction – the consummation of passion. 'But now it is finished, and I never want to see her again' (Kierkegaard, 1987: 466). Seduction counts on irony, nonsense and uselessness, but that does not mean it cannot have rational goals. Seduction counts on appearances, but that does not mean it cannot have real consequences. We should no longer underestimate the role of irony, nonsense and the absurd in online media and their effect on politics. What is 'just for fun' for some people becomes deadly serious for others.

One of the reasons that *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* is such a great film is because it shows how the whole political game of deterrence and simulation during the Cold War is blown up by the nationalistic passion of belonging. General Jack D. Ripper does not understand the seduction of simulations and perceives the Soviet threat as more than real. And at the end of the film aircraft commander Major T. J. 'King' Kong does everything possible to drop the bomb and rides it with his cowboy hat on. Reality is revisited. The absurd nationalistic videos, invoking blood and crosses in the context of rap songs and flashing banners, have more than real consequences. While theoreticians complain about the world of simulacra, the extreme right-wing party Ataka feels comfortable as an elected entity within the Bulgarian parliament. What is more, it is precisely the social media that radicalize pre-existing offline nationalist discourses.

The game of freedom and playful seduction ends with the appearance of the Commendatore – the firm grip of offline reality. In the

jocular drama of the election campaign of 2009, the comic and playful led to the serious. YouTube is a clockwork media. To paraphrase the title of Stanley Kubrick's movie, we have all learned to stop worrying and love politics. But as the song goes, 'too much love will kill you'. Conventional politics rests in short pieces of digital seduction. But it does not rest in peace. It reappears again and again to haunt the easy promises of the digital Utopia.

Notes

1. Vbox7 is the Bulgarian equivalent to YouTube and ranks as the sixth most popular website in the country, while YouTube is the fourth (Alexa, 2011).
2. The project is an initiative of the Foundation 'Media Democracy' and is still ongoing in 2011. The monthly analyses from January 2009 to January 2010 can be found in Bulgarian on the website of the foundation (Media Democracy, 2011).
3. There are many alternative versions of the video uploaded online. The whole speech can be found uploaded on YouTube (Borisov in Chicago, 2009). The most popular versions are from TV News, featuring the speech, taken from YouTube: Audio Recording (2009), Borisov (2009), and so on.
4. The former Tsar of Bulgaria, exiled on 16 September 1946, after the beginning of the communist regime in the country. In 2001, 12 years after 1989, he formed a political party National Movement Simeon II and won a large victory in the parliamentary elections held on 17 June 2001, capturing 120 of the 240 seats in Parliament. In a country with strong republican traditions he swore to protect the constitution and ruled for four years, but was not re-elected. Over the following four years his party participated in a much contested triple coalition with the Bulgarian Socialist Party and DPS (Movement for rights and freedoms).
5. GERB won 39.72 per cent of the votes. Here and afterwards the results of the parties are quoted from the website of the Central Elections Commission (2009).
6. It is an important source of national pride in Bulgaria that the country managed to save its Jews during World War II.
7. DPS received 14.45 per cent of the votes in 2009, compared to 14.07 in the 2005 elections.
8. 9.36 per cent of the votes, compared to 8.93 per cent in the previous elections.
9. The Cyrillic, or Slavonic alphabet (also used in Russian) is considered to be one of the symbols of Bulgaria. Cyril and Methodius, who created the Slavonic alphabet, are commemorated as national saints and the Day of the Slavonic Alphabet is traditionally one of the biggest holidays in the country. A history of globalization can be written, based on the transformations of Cyrillic in the age of the Internet. While in the 1990s most of the people started writing using the Latin alphabet, there was a widespread informal movement for the preservation of Cyrillic as a key national treasure, and now writing in Cyrillic has become a matter of being a proper Bulgarian or not.

10. Interviews with 'Priziv' – youth movement for free education (November 2010).
11. 17.70 per cent of the votes, leaving the party far behind GERB in the battle for first place. In the previous election BSP had 33.98 per cent and came first.
12. The right-wing orientation of the Bulgarian blogosphere is a fact confirmed in numerous interviews with bloggers such as Konstantin-Pavlov Komitata (May 2009), Marfuzii (April 2009), Bogomil Shopov (June 2009). The extensive list of bloggers who are defined as right-wing contains most of the top 20 bloggers on the country, <<http://miraclio.wordpress.com/2009/03/28/блогъри-с-десни-убеждения/>>, accessed 13 April 2011.
13. 6.76 per cent of the votes compared to 7.07 per cent and 8.44 per cent for the respective member parties of The Blue Coalition.
14. 0.52 per cent of the votes.

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