TROLLING AS POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract. The paper aims to highlight some of the characteristics of political trolling and to follow how the phenomenon functions in the Bulgarian context. The analysis focuses on the specifics of troll language and the so-called troll dilemma, as well as on the interaction between the troll and his audience. The features of the transfer of trolling from an online to an offline environment and the characteristics of trolling in a political context are examined. It is suggested that trolling should not be interpreted as antisocial, anarchic behaviour, but as communication that parasitises ideas of objectivity and truth.

Keywords: trolling; politics; popular culture; social networks; post-truth

The term trolling can be identified as a set of linguistic behaviours and real-life actions, but its meaning is not clearly defined and is constantly changing. One of the most common explanations is etymological – trolling refers to a method of fishing where bait is placed on a hook and the angler slowly moves the boat through the water, waiting for the fish to bite. Some researchers trace the meaning of the term back to Norse mythology, where trolls are malevolent, monstrous being who lurk under bridges, threatening and blackmailing their victims for small favours. Definitions tend to focus on the presence of provocative messages, often bordering on hate speech. In this sense, trolling is defined as a negative communication activity that undermines democratic dialogue. Of course, trolling is not a new type of behaviour and became popular long before the appearance of new media. But the teasing and inflaming of negative emotions – from playful and harmless behaviours to abuse and harassment – has reached gigantic proportions thanks to the Internet, which has secured its status as a successful communication strategy.

Patrick Connolly (Connolly 2021) analyses troll speech using tools from the philosophy of language and the interaction between the troll and his/her audience. Examining the rhetorical nature of trolling, Connolly identifies the so-called 'trolling dilemma' – whether to take trolling seriously and thus legitimise it, or to treat it as a frivolous act and dismiss it. Trolling, he argues, is generally defined as a systematically divisive act. In the act of trolling, the audience at which the language is directed is manipulated and inflamed for the entertainment of the troll and his supporters. Connolly

argues that there is a division among the troll's audience – one part being the 'target' and another being the 'spectators' who derive pleasure from watching the effect of trolling on the target. In this sense, the act of trolling is impossible without creating a division. This explains why regimes that benefit from division in society see trolling as a propaganda tool. New media is a fertile environment for such division, creating echo chambers and filter bubbles in which users only hear voices that support their own views and avoid (and loathe) dissonant viewpoints.

We cannot help but notice that the term trolling often conceals various actions. To avoid such confusion, Connolly suggests that trolling should be seen as a speech act with several unifying characteristics, which at its core remains a divisive, manipulative act regardless of the troll's specific goals - and therefore always has ethical implications.

According to Connolly's thesis, trolling is successful as a rule because it presents its audience with a specific dilemma: how to respond to the act of trolling. This dilemma arises not only when the act of trolling is successful, i.e. when the targeted people do not realise that they are being trolled and respond in earnest. In other cases, when they suspect that they are being trolled, they face the dilemma of how to respond – in earnest or dismissively. If they choose to respond in an appropriately earnest manner, they allow the troll to achieve his/her goal: the respondent behaves exactly as the troll wants. If they do not take the troll's claims seriously, or simply ignore them, they allow the troll to continue undisturbed, and the risk remains that their language will lead to actions based on hate, fear, or other negative emotions. If we simply do not respond to troll attacks – which is the most common advice, by the way: 'don't feed the trolls' – we may find ourselves in the position of the second type of audience – the spectators, whose reaction can also be interpreted as tacit approval.

The emergence of such a dilemma from the communicative act of trolling may explain its success in recent years and its rapid migration from online to offline environments. Populist politicians adopt it with ease, to the extent that they rely on creating division based on negative emotions and spreading violent ideologies. In this case, success also lies in the fact that there is no right response to troll speech. Either the troll achieves his goal by being taken seriously, or he achieves a space in which he can freely spread his provocative statements without any resistance. In this sense, trolling is speech to which there is no proper response. This effect is achieved regardless of the specific statements and arguments – success is achieved through the rhetorical device of embedded ambiguity.

While some analyses focus on trolling as an anti-social phenomenon that destroys the possibility of reasonable debate and transgresses all norms of communication, others explore the specificities of the transfer of from online to offline environments and its characteristics in a political context. The focus on the figure of the political troll is significant in that it indicates the degree of change in the public sphere.

Hedwig Lieback (Lieback 2019) analyses the impact of trolling in contemporary politics, arguing that its popularity is not due to the disruption, but to the reproduction

of some of the patterns of objective communication on a discursive and emotional level. Through such an approach, trolling can be characterised as a political lifestyle in which the subject occupies the position of an outsider and "parrhesiast" in the sense outlined by Michel Foucault (Foucault 2019) – a courageous, incorruptible truth-teller. Political trolling is based on the idea that there is hidden truth deliberately ignored and concealed by the media and political elites which the troll has access to and dares to express publicly. In political terms, troll rhetoric can be considered successful if trolls' statements are met with outrage or anger by the people trolls perceive as representatives of the political elites. Trolls then have the opportunity to dismiss their opponents as weak, biased, emotionally attached and therefore illegitimate in the political debate, and thus win the argument. To justify this type of communicative behaviour, trolls often tout free speech, adding new perspectives to the conversation and branding opposition to their claims as a totalitarian attempt to silence resistance. Leibeck explores the applicability of the online phenomenon of trolling as political behaviour, arguing that the success of this communicative strategy in the realm of political rhetoric stems from the invocation of principles that have long underpinned Western understandings of political debate. In addition, the media environment of the Internet era, which supports provocative content in every way, further fuels trolling. In this line of argument, trolling as a political and communication strategy is successful not because it offers anarchic, deviant, reckless or antisocial communication, but because it features key concepts of progressive movements. The idea of freedom of speech, for example, is used particularly often. When trolls invoke widely accepted norms – of objectivity, of emotional detachment from the political process, of democratic resistance to forms of oppression – they are actually claiming a heroic, legitimate position in the public sphere.

According to Laibeck, research on political trolling should focus not on the ways it subverts established public norms of communication and its lack of morality, but on identifying the values and norms that political trolls use to ensure their success. In this sense, it can be said that trolls develop a new mythology based on these values, while at the same time deforming or inverting them in order to legitimise their ideology – for example, normalising totalitarian and authoritarian attitudes under the pretext of defending the idea of freedom of speech. Political trolling exploits the idea of a long-established consensus around the concept of public communication, according to which the latter should be based on a shared commitment to "serving the nation". Political trolls claim to serve the interests of the nation by speaking from the position of an outsider standing up for the truth in difficult circumstances.

One of the main claims of political trolls is that mainstream media censors the truth. In this way, they present themselves as the beleaguered defenders of honesty, occupying the moral high ground. All this, combined with their provocative rhetorical style, which sometimes fuses with hate speech, gives them access to traditional media, which are forced to compete with new media for the attention of consumers.

Political trolling as a phenomenon marks the transition from political rhetoric that seeks consensus (despite controversy) to rhetoric based on provocation, which aims not only to undermine their opponents' arguments but also to delegitimize them as emotional, unreasonable and prejudiced. Political trolling changes the whole dynamic of public opinion formation by taking advantage of new media. In this context, a link can be made to so-called political tribalism or political subcultures (Ganev 2024) – the desire to belong to the tribe of those who are like you and to gain their approval. Whereas in the era of traditional media, the content of news flows and interpretations was controlled by editors, social networks provide unlimited access to unedited, unfiltered, unverified and unchecked information. In this situation, according to Zhana Popova's analysis (Popova 2017), traditional media are also changing their functions, striving to inform through entertainment, and the result is a falsification of the public sphere. Algorithms and artificial intelligence further complicate the situation by becoming participants in communication and, as N. Tsenkov (Tsenkov 2024) notes, creating the conditions for a new linguistic situation. For example, public opinion can be shaped by false statements and manipulative interpretations that capture the interest and attention of consumers. A study on the processes of public opinion formation in Bulgaria registered negative public perceptions regarding the influence of the media on public opinion formation. Restrictions on access to adequate, authentic and regular information on national television are seen not only as facilitating a rapid shift in the focus of public attention, but also as diluting the opportunities for taking a clear and firm position on public issues (Alexandrova 2021a). On the other hand, online communication may contribute to increasing social conformity due to the algorithmically organized group similarity of opinions, but in reality, the closure in separate virtual spaces excludes the possibility of debate, leads to fragmentation, group encapsulation of opinions and thus prevents productive interaction to achieve consensus among different groups in society (Alexandrova 2021b). Echo chambers and filter bubbles allow the delegitimisation of dissonant voices, which political trolling exploits to shape public opinion on highly emotive issues. Political trolling benefits from the clear and increasingly thick demarcation lines between audiences. The political troll builds an image of a brave, emotionally stable – and therefore rational and legitimate - politician, a fighter for free speech. They also benefit from being well versed in the context of the new media and the skillful use of the communication tools they provide.

A key characteristic of political trolls is that they make no attempt to present clear political arguments. Communication is not based on exposition, justification and defense of ideas and theses, but on highlighting one's own rhetorical advantages. In short, it is not what is said that matters, but how it is said. Political trolling is a kind of performance that relies on what J. Harsin (Harsin 2015) calls 'emotional truth'. This is an important distinction between online and offline trolling. While in the virtual space trolls are mostly anonymous, hiding behind fake profiles on social networks, offline

political trolls emphasise their visibility, creating their own brand – that of a paraplegic fighting against the political elites for the good of the people.

In this line, emotionality begins to be seen as the opposite of political reason. The strategy of political trolls to outrage and anger opponents by provoking an emotional response and then branding these opponents as illegitimate politicians is also embedded here. Trolls' experience in virtual space enables them to effectively exploit and capitalise on the economy of emotions.

Part of the appeal of troll discourse is the lack of explicitness in responding to provocations.

There is almost always an element of uncertainty about the seriousness of the speech – whether, in the case of political trolling, there are genuine accusations or simply the pleasure of provoking and angering opponents; whether a politician is being attacked on the basis of arguments they made or simply vilified because the entire political elite deserves punishment. The pleasure of provocation for provocation's sake is detrimental to the functioning of both communication and the political sphere. Thus, another pitfall set by political trolling is ambiguity about their intentions and recklessness about the effects of their actions.

In the Bulgarian context, there are a number of examples of political trolling. Of interest are the leaders of a party named Greatness that emerged in 2024, which – surprisingly for many analysts – passed the 4 per cent threshold in the elections and entered the 50th National Assembly, shortly after which its parliamentary group collapsed amid loud scandals.

The Greatness project has been gaining popularity on social networks – especially during election campaigns. The party originated around the so-called Historical Park – a thematic attraction near the village of Neofit Rilski in the municipality of Vetrino. The scale of the park, with investments of millions of leva, has been accompanied by scandals of non-transparent financing, illegal sales of shares, tax fraud and corruption in the local government. At the same time, information appears in the media about the community around the Historical Park functioning as a sect, and that the leaders of Greatness are creating their own paramilitary organisation. At the same time, the historical park has been granted several awards by the Bulgarian Ministry of Tourism. The political success of Greatness can be seen as the result of a combination of the simulation of historical authenticity, the stimulation of patriotic (in this case mostly nationalist) sentiments and criticism of the media and the political elites.

The speech of one of the two leaders of the Greatness faction, Nikolai Markov (who untruthfully calls himself "colonel"), is built around the main points of political trolling. For the purpose of the study, a qualitative analysis of the content of several media appearances of Markov was conducted – on the YouTube channel of journalist Martin Karbovsky (before the June 2024 elections), on Euronews TV (after the elections) and on BTV (on the occasion of the split of the "Greatness" faction), and here only some of the main conclusions are summarised.

In the online studio of the journalist Martin Karbovsky's, Markov is the most verbose, with almost unlimited time to present his version of the truth. His discourse is focused in several directions:

1. Strong criticism of the traditional media for not giving the party a platform for expression. The traditional media are repeatedly accused of unprofessional behaviour, corruption and dishonesty. Markov takes a provocative stance towards journalists, keeping them arm's length.

2. Criticism and accusations of corruption of the Bulgarian sociological agencies, which, in Markov's words, had asked his party to pay a large sum in order to be represented in the projected results in the 2024 general elections.

3. Markov stylises himself as an outsider – he declares himself a "dissident", harassed by the media (where he is not featured) and by government institutions (which check his financial status). He strikes a heroic pose, declaring that the attacks on him do not bother him but make him stronger.

4. Markov repeats that he is fighting for freedom of expression.

5. He claims to have access to "classified information". He says he has discrediting information on mainstream politicians. But he emphasizes that he will not make it public to protect the peace of their wives and children. He accentuates his moral position – notes that he cares about honesty, truth, dignity.

6. The Greatness leader announces his position as a professor at a private (not a state) university, which should imply rationality, scientific approach, erudition, confidence.

7. Markov claims that he has a clear, orderly, rational vision for the governance of the country and for creating an environment for the proper functioning of the media.

8. He presents himself as a wise man, with wisdom obtained through secret channels combined with a philosophical view of life and the world. When a journalist asks him why he is in politics, he replies: "A man follows his path when he has an inner urge... Politics is the highest form of piloting the human brain".

9. He is dramatic. Markov appeals to the emotions of his potential voters by trying to evoke experiences similar to those in the Historical Park: "I want to have accomplices in the rise of Bulgaria from the ashes to the sun". "We should be beacons, not rotting stumps. Let us do what we can for Bulgaria, only God will decide the rest".

10. He tries to arouse negative emotions in the audience. Competent explanations about domestic politics are transferred to the geopolitical situation of Ukraine with the statement that it is inevitable that the war in Ukraine will be transferred to Bulgarian territory: "There will be a war... They will put our men, our children and our grandchildren into trucks and bring back their corpses. Vote for parties that are against the war". Thus, although the overall rhetoric is calm, even confident, it ends with a threat and an attempt to provoke fear and panic, focusing again on heroism and awakening the sense of duty: "We must commit ourselves to Bulgaria, to protect our women, our children, our territory, everything that is precious to us. This is the most important task to begin with." The speech returns to the simulation of

authentic, heroic, sublime emotions to transport the audience back to the experience of the rides of the Historical Park.

Markov's speech in other media (*Euronews TV*, *BTV*) is similar in tone, however, one has to take into account a much harsher, more hostile, more provocative and instructive attitude towards his interviewers. "These are obvious things, madam, you should know them"; "That's not true, you haven't checked these things, you're not starring in a movie".

Regardless of the media in which he appears, Markov's rhetoric is of a cool, self-confident person, demonstrating vision and high competence. The leader of Greatness speaks in numbers and draws diagrams but provides no real evidence for any of his claims. He professes that sociology, political science, journalism, medicine, the Bulgarian parliament are not "truthful". The leitmotif that always emerges first is the criticism of journalism – in this sense, the provocations of political trolling are directed not so much at political opponents as at the media. Markov positions himself as a truth-teller against the corrupt media. In this case, the "target" of the provocations turns out not to be his political opponents, but journalists (his actual interlocutors in media studios, but also the media in general). From the fact that the provocations are aimed more at journalists than at political opponents, we could conclude that the aim of trolling is not to discredit the politicians of the so-called status quo, but the media. In this sense, the target is not the political sphere but the media, or the two spheres are seen as inextricably linked.

In this case, the media have no real choice. If they take Markov's trolling seriously, he will achieve his goal – their angry reaction will put them in an emotional, i.e. not professional, position and confirm his accusations of incompetence. If they ignore him, they will confirm his position as an outsider, deprived of his right to free speech. Furthermore, by ignoring him, they will be depriving themselves of the opportunity to attract and hold the attention of an audience hungry for entertainment. It is this entertainment, together with the attention economy, that makes it impossible to refuse media coverage – which ensures the success of trolling as a communication strategy.

Conclusion

Despite claims that trolling is primarily characterised by an anarchic lack of concern for moral values, the rhetorical and philosophical dynamics that make up this particular form of political communication suggest that it successfully capitalises on – or rather parasitises on – ideas of objectivity under the guise of revealing the truth. The catch is that any challenge to existing norms is often automatically presented as superior insight, and this contradiction itself establishes the claim as truth independently arrived at.

Trolling as a social and political phenomenon requires a communicative strategy that is used for different purposes and a rhetoric that, despite its modern emergence, is based on long-established notions of truth. Trolling thus uses culturally embedded concepts that have been at the heart of progressive movements and have provoked political struggles and applies them in the context of social media and the attention economy.

Trolling can be described as a rhetorical strategy that goes beyond the boundaries of the online environment and increasingly takes over offline spaces. These are public statements accessible to a wide audience that shape public opinion and influence the public sphere. Offline trolls use strategies to adapt online practices to the real world. If online trolling is successful when the target audience engages in the same offensive rhetoric, offline trolling in politics has achieved its goal when it arouses the outrage of political opponents – or, in the case of Nikolay Markov of the Greatness political party described above, the media. The majority of political trolling communication tends to focus on populist theses, and although the topics are heterogeneous, issues such as the preservation of the patriarchy and opposition to political correctness are very often touched upon. In offline political trolling, the communication is aimed at fiercely contesting the opponent's opinion, with the aim of eliciting an emotional, angry response from the opponent.

Political trolling as a phenomenon marks the transition from a political rhetoric that seeks consensus despite controversy to a rhetoric based on provocation that aims not only to undermine the opponent's arguments but also to legitimize the oponent as emotional, unreasonable, prejudiced and unprofessional. Political trolling changes the entire dynamic of public opinion formation, which is exploited by the new means of mass communication. Whereas in the era of traditional media, the content of the news flow and its interpretations was controlled by editorial staff, social networks provide unlimited access to unedited, unfiltered, unverified and ultimately often unreliable information. As a result, public opinion can be shaped by false statements and manipulative interpretations that can capture the interest and attention of consumers. Echo chambers and filter bubbles allow the delegitimisation of dissonant voices, which political trolling exploits to shape public opinion on sensitive issues. Political trolling benefits from the fact that the demarcation lines between different electorate groups are becoming increasingly distinct. The political troll's image is one of an emotionally stable – and therefore rational and legitimate – politician, a fighter for freedom of speech. By establishing a clear emotional hierarchy, the troll achieves the delegitimisation of his opponents. It could be argued that political trolling owes much of its success to its familiarity with the context of new media and its skilful use of the communication tools new media provide.

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