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DIGITAL SPACE AND THE NAMES OF POLITICAL PARTIES

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Abstract

The paper examines specific features of renaming of German political parties in the digital media space. The digital media environment today offers additional opportunities for party renaming. This provides material for discussing which measures to modify the name of political parties in Germany in the modern digital space can be successful, and which can harm the party and its image. To achieve this goal, official websites and discussion forums of parties, magazine and newspaper articles, as well as reader comments by leading German online publications on social networks have been studied. The key approaches to party renaming process in a virtual environment have been identified. It is shown that the German digital space today serves as a platform for a detailed justification of the change of a party name and the presentation of a new approved variant or variants to the target audience, collection of suitable names with subsequent consideration by the representatives of the parties and integration of the opinions of the relative change of the name of the party. Turning directly to the audience with the question of changing the name, the founders of the parties are trying not only to find out the nominative preferences of the voters, but also to improve interaction with the modern electorally significant online audience and thereby expand it. It is noted that the so-called “external” discriminating renaming is gaining popularity in the digital German media space, as a result of which party nicknames arise.

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Keywords: Digital communication, nickname nomination, political communication, political party name, renaming



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1. Introduction

Global digitalization in the modern world has affected almost all social spheres. The Internet has contributed to the transformation of economic, social and cultural relations. Digitalization has also affected modern political communication. Today, the Internet is a rapidly growing global platform for creating and broadcasting information about power that forms a fundamentally new environment for political communication. In political communication, information becomes a strategic resource of the power. Citizens' belief in "loyal political strategy" is produced by the power through intermediaries which are mass media. Mass media are not means of communication, but the form of communication that constitutes interactions of systems. Consequently, media and politics "are doomed" to be in a constant engagement. The politics becomes public in the sphere of this interaction (Karpova et al., 2017, p. 351).

Generations formed in a new digital sociocultural and technological context enter political and social life, thereby making the digital environment an important new field for political propaganda" (Solovey, 2018, p. 81). Digital space has become an additional platform where an online audience has the opportunity to criticize government policies and thereby try to influence the socio-political situation. German political parties have moved from creating separate sites that represent their position on the Web to entire portals with a host of functions. These high-quality resources provide readers with up-to-date information on the activities of the party, reflect their view of various social problems, convince and offer to participate in discussions. One of the obvious trends is the transfer of interaction with the audience to specially created resources, which are communication platforms (Afonasyeva & Khubetcova, 2016). Politicians, having realized the power of digital resources, began to create forums and social media accounts not only as a way of promoting their election campaigns, but also as a platform for dialogue with representatives of the Internet environment.

Therefore, the Internet makes authorities closer and more accessible to the electorate. The presence of official party blogs on the Web also demonstrates the desire of official structures for information transparency and dialogue with the electorate. In addition, they serve as an effective marker that displays the social well-being of the population, the level of authority of the politicians, the quality of life of the population and the reasons for the inhibition of ongoing reforms in the region. The virtual resources of blogs and forums do not just transfer information, they allow you to engage stakeholders in a dialogue, so that during the discussion you can develop an opinion, a strategy to solve a particular problem (Khaliullina, 2017).

"Political media discourse is becoming not only the most important and constantly acting factor of public life, but also a factor that affects political decisions. The public opinions presented in digital media formats demonstrate the current spectrum of topics of the political agenda" (Kaminskaya et al., 2019, p. 383). The development of digital channels and the modernization of contemporary means of political communication have created a situation in which politicians have begun to regularly try to present new information about the party to Internet users. Thus, via the virtual environment, they report on the party's past or planned renaming, trying to act in accordance with the needs of the digital generation, which has chosen the Internet as the main source of information. This is especially relevant in conditions of loss of trust in traditional media.

2. Problem Statement

It is well known that the founders of political parties take the choice of the name of their association seriously, because the party name becomes its brand for a long time, if not forever. Nevertheless, there are situations when political parties are forced to change their names. An examination of the language mechanisms for party renaming and extra-linguistic motives for changing the name on the material of modern political parties in Germany showed that representatives of political forces more often submit proposals for renaming parties, but they rarely resort to name changes, given all the risks that are associated with such rebranding. However, subject to certain conditions, it can be painless for the party. With a competent marketing policy and correct use of the basic language mechanisms (changing the name rating pole from negative to positive, having a clear trace of a precedent name in a new brand, getting rid of archaic components, ensuring shortness of new names), renaming may not be a risky business, but a tool to increase the effectiveness of political communication and strengthening the position of the party in the political arena. “Media support is considered the most important component of successful political renaming in modern conditions” (Tkachenko, 2019, p. 123).

Digital space today offers additional renaming opportunities for parties: the presentation of a new approved name or its variants to the target audience and the collection of suitable names for discussion by party representatives. However, these actions can lead to both success and failure. It is assumed that digital communication can be both a crucial tool for an effective name change and a danger to a political brand, because in the German digital media space the so-called “external” discriminating renaming is gaining popularity, which results in creating nicknames for parties. “Online media is a multifaceted phenomenon, the need to study which in the aspect of political communication is becoming increasingly important. The online media provides a very wide range of opportunities for influencing political consciousness” (Kalugina, 2017, p. 414).

In this regard, it is relevant to consider the effectiveness of digital media space for party renaming process and whether it provides new opportunities for parties to increase the effectiveness of political communication between its participants.

3. Research Questions

In the course of this study, the following questions will be answered:

- 3.1. What are the positive sides of the renaming of the political parties of Germany in a virtual environment?
- 3.2. What setbacks can a party expect in the course of coverage and implementation of party name modification in digital space?
- 3.3. What role does the online environment play in party renaming?

4. Purpose of the Study

Identify successful and unsuccessful measures for renaming political parties in Germany in the modern digital space. To achieve this goal, official websites and discussion forums of parties, magazine

and newspaper articles, as well as reader comments of leading German online publications on social networks have been studied: the official SGP website, the Piratenpartei Deutschland discussion forum, *Manager Magazin* magazine, the official “ZDF heute” Facebook account.

5. Research Methods

- 5.1. Selected media texts were studied using stylistic analysis, which allowed us to identify the main techniques for implementing the communicative perspective of the media text and affecting the target audience. A special attention is paid to the functioning of the nicknames of parties.
- 5.2. In addition, a quantitative analysis is used to track the activity of a German audience in polls and the language game of choosing a party name.
- 5.3. The discourse analysis method was used to examine the relationship between the linguistic and extralinguistic side of modern media texts which affect the nominative part of the political brand.

6. Findings

In February 2017, at the party congress of the party “*Partei für Soziale Gleichheit*”, it was unanimously decided to rename the party to “*Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei, Vierte Internationale*”. On its official website, the party published a resolution of 10 paragraphs which explain the motivation for changing the name. The main reasons for renaming listed there are: “Firstly, the German section takes the same name as all other sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, thus emphasizing the unity of the world party of the socialist revolution, which in all countries of the world is fighting for the same international principles. Secondly, the concept of the word “socialist” (sozialistische) in the title expresses the main goal of the party: to overthrow capitalism and build a socialist society ... Social inequality has reached unprecedented levels throughout the world. During this time, sections of the International Committee for Social Equality appealed to the working class, while the “left”, “radical left”, “new communists”, “anti-capitalists”, “international socialists”, and some others, defend privileges of the rich ... This is the only party that advocates the overthrow of capitalism and the creation of a socialist society. This must find its faultless expression in the name of the party” (SPG, 2017).

A detailed rationale of the modification of the party’s name and the publication of the resolution in digital space may indicate the founder’s serious approach to the choice of the party’s name, a clear understanding of the goals and objectives of the party movement, and the presentation of the party’s values through the nominative part of the political brand, which may inspire trust among the target audience and not raise additional questions and also promote the attractive image of the party movement. It is important to note that the image of a party should be understood as ideas about political power, prevailing in an individual and mass consciousness, opinions of a rational or emotional nature about a party that arose in a particular group of people on the basis of an image formed purposefully or involuntarily as a result of direct or indirect perceptions of a political party. Since the image is a category consisting of the attitude to the object of perception, the image of the party is able to influence the electoral behavior of citizens and other

participants in the political process. It is the image of a political party that allows voters to judge the party in all its forms (Chizhov, 2016).

In addition, the party re-registered its name with the partial preservation of the original familiar design of the nomination. When the old name is easily recognizable in the new name, the renaming can be considered as the most successful, since the new transparent name does not raise doubts about to which party it belongs.

The important stages of political renaming are making a list of possible options for a new party name, checking the name in the register of registered political parties, considering options within the party and presenting it to the target audience.

An interesting situation to consider is the presentation of a possible new name for *Piratenpartei Deutschland*, which created the Discussion Forum with the aim of collecting feedback and suggestions for improving the work. So, in October 2018, the party decided to find out the opinion of the electorate at the forum regarding the possible change of the party's name to "*Piratenpartei Europa Nationalverband Deutschland*". Addressing the audience, party members emphasized that the change of name was "just a fleeting thought," however, it has already been discussed more than once in the party's circle, because the new name will emphasize the European unity of the pirate movement. The post gained 13 detailed comments and 337 views. At the same time, readers not only expressed their opinions, but also entered into lively discussions on party renaming:

- „Wie wäre es mit „Piraten Europa“ bzw. wer hat entschieden, dass der Parteibegriff mit in den Namen muss? Die Grünen labeln sich z.B. auch nicht mit dem Begriff der „Partei“, genauso die Linken. Sind lange Namen, welche sich nur mit Akronym einigermaßen gut anhören nicht out? Mein Verständnis: Out: FDP, SPD, CSU, AfD. In: Die Linke, Bündnis 90/die Grünen, Die Piraten, Die PARTEI. Der Vorteil, von kurzen und prägnanten Namen im Gegensatz zu Akronymen ist, dass die sofort mit etwas assoziiert werden.“

- „Bitte nicht „Nationalverband“! Regionalverband würde mir gefallen.“

- „Ich plädiere für überhaupt keinen Zusatz, denn die Piraten sind eine internationale Bewegung, welche sogar über Europa hinausreicht. "Die Piraten", das reicht. Weniger ist mehr.“

- „Ich vermute mal, dir gefällt das Wort „National“ nicht, aufgrund der negativen Besetzung durch rechts-konservative und rechts-extreme Kräfte. Mein Gedanke dazu ist, dass die Begrifflichkeit „Regional“ für eine weitaus niedrigere europäische Verwaltungsebene steht (Kreis- und Regionalverbände), während hingegen „Nationalverband“ für die einzelnen Mitgliedsstaaten Europas steht.“

- „Ja, denn Verbände sind im Cyberspace überflüssig. Das Internet kennt keine Orts-/Regional-/Landes-/Bundes-/Kontinentalgrenzen. Projektgruppen oder Foren reichen völlig aus. Zudem reagiere ich extrem allergisch auf irgendeinen Begriff der „National“ beinhaltet. Absolut unzeitgemäß und ein Begriff der Ewiggestrigen. „German Speaking Part of Pirat Party“ bzw. „Die Piraten, dt.Version“ würde ich noch zähneknirschend akzeptieren“ (Diskussionsforum der Piratenpartei, 2018).

Such integration of the opinions of potential voters in the digital space, behind which there is an active discussion about the choice of a party name, is a special technique for implementing cooperation between government officials and ordinary citizens. We can assume that *Piratenpartei Deutschland* managed to reach a new level of interaction with the electorate thanks to the forum, which could have a

positive effect on its image, and as the survey showed, a change in name with the addition of an archaic component, which entails its extension and, accordingly, becoming an abbreviation, was not supported by the audience.

Let us turn to the example of the implementation of a different political strategy of renaming in the digital environment, the so-called renaming from the adversary, “the essence of this phenomenon is the choice of such a means of renaming, that is, changing the name of the political adversary adopted in the political sphere that is aimed at its moral destruction or sharp reduction of his political status due to the creation of a new figurative and symbolic nominating complex on the basis of and with traces of the original name, which entails a change in the attitude from positive to negative” (Ivanova, 2013, p. 42). The adversary may be politicians, the media and the audience itself. In 2014, Deputy *Frei Demokratische Partei (FDP)* Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann, in an interview with the *Rheinischen Post* newspaper, spoke about the need for rebranding of the party, which she primarily associated with the mandatory change of party name. Manager Magazin journalist Christoph Rottwin (2012) found that names such as “Die Überflüssigen” and “Die Unklaren” would be best for *FDP*. The audience began to actively offer new names on social networks. However, most of the proposed names would not be included in the party’s shot list, because they represented offensive nominations. And the publication “ZDF heute” in the official Facebook account acted as an initiator of renaming from the adversary and encouraged readers to propose names for *FDP* (ZDF heute, 2014). The survey collected 54 variants of names through which German citizens expressed their opinions on party members and its activities. Readers criticized the *FDP* for weak political activity and low election performance: *SOMMERLOCH, AlteSäckeParteiDeutschlands, R.I.P., Fast Drei Prozent, Unter fünf Prozent*. Also, from the German audience, the party representatives themselves were criticized for misuse of funds and financial viability: *Geldschlucker Partei Deutschland, Fundierte Korrupte Kacke, Partei des monetären Faschismus, Hochfinanzpartei Deutschland, Pro Geld und Überheblichkeit, Asoziale Reichen-Partei Korrupter Kapitalisten*. Also, readers did not restrain themselves from insults: *deppen Partei Deutschlands, die Liberalen Pappnasen, Partei der Idioten, SCHWAMM*. The number of offensive nominations amounted to almost 20 percent of all the proposed names, which may indicate a high level of aggression of German society to this political force. Most researchers agree that the behavior of people on the Internet is a significant indicator of a wide range of social phenomena and processes, including: stratification of society, openness of the political system, congruence of value orientations and behavior strategies in offline and online environments (Brodovskaya et al., 2016). It is important to note that the post scored 149 comments. Such a response and the active participation of the audience in the language game of choosing a name can be considered as a creative entertaining element of the country's modern political everyday life, which serves as a peculiar way of sublimating aggression against political forces.

Thus, external renaming in digital communication becomes the reason for the emergence of nickname names of parties as an effective tool for forming their unattractive images. Digital space promotes the spread of nicknames to the masses, “as a result of which new nicknames with negative connotations can define a certain attitude to political power, be actively used along with official party names or even supplant official party names” (Ilyasov, 2000, p. 152). The results obtained allow us to conclude that the digital space today serves as an important platform for informing the audience about party renaming, integrating opinions regarding a name change and creating a language tool to discriminate against political

power. Renaming in the virtual space can be considered a measure taken by politicians in response to a request from a modern Internet audience who wants to receive first-hand information through virtual sources. “Depending on the goal of the politician, a social network can be a platform for answering questions from a readership, a place to broadcast the position to the masses, or a PR and propaganda tool” (Chizhik, 2015, p. 531).

However, the trend of affective communicative behavior of a digital audience with obscene renaming of parties not only forms a misconception about the party and its representatives, lowers its status, but also generally discredits the institutions of power. Therefore, in connection with the need to implement political goals on digital platforms and at the same time with their increasing role and relevance, it is important, “not missing out on information initiatives and using new modern means of communication to maintain dialogue with voters, at the same time not to allow a drop in the level of political culture” (Surma, 2015, p. 242). Such processes can lead to a complete loss of people's trust in politicians and institutions, and become the reason for the general political apathy of users. Obviously, media platforms, due to their accessibility, are able to misinform and engage in antisocial behavior. It seems that it is the state, taking into account the needs of society, that should introduce the population to a high culture and exercise maximum control over communications in the global network, publications in online media and social networks (Koryagina & Kravchenko, 2019).

7. Conclusion

Thus, the analysis showed that digital space is an important platform for party renaming. The digital environment provides the opportunity and space for a detailed justification for changing the party name. In addition, turning directly to the audience with a question about a name change, parties are not only trying to find out the nominative preferences of voters, but also to improve interaction with a modern electorally significant online audience and thereby expand it.

However, the virtual sphere becomes a convenient tool for manipulating the consciousness of the masses through nicknames with a negative evaluative connotation, followed by undermining the image of the party. This popular element of modern political discourse is a factor in creating a negative background in the digital political space, which forms a low political culture. However, it is important to remember here that even through the negative response of the party they get the opportunity to learn their weaknesses and “correct mistakes.”

It can be stated that the digital space plays a positive role in promoting the diversity of forms of political participation in the processes of party renaming, but at the same time it creates the basis for discrediting political forces, making unsubstantiated judgments and offensive statements through nickname nominations, where, from the linguistic point of view, the use of the invective vocabulary is acceptable.

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