ISSA Proceedings 2014 – Argumentation In Bulgarian Political Virtual Forums And Social Networks

Abstract: This study examines specific features of the argumentation in virtual political forums and social networks. The subjects of research are political forums and Facebook groups as a part of the civil protests in Bulgaria over the period of two years (2012-2013). The main goal is investigation on arguments used by Bulgarian citizens in virtual dialogues, appropriateness and effectiveness of argumentation. The second goal includes survey of specific verbal, visual and multi-modal arguments used in the social networks.

Keywords: argumentation, visual and multi-modal arguments, political virtual forums, social networks

1. *Introduction*

The new Bulgarian state has reached 135 years of independent history and form of government since 1879. From 1945 to 1991 (during socialism) the form of government was a specific kind of republic (the People's Republic of Bulgaria). The Constitution from July 1991 states that Bulgaria is a parliamentary representative democratic republic. The multi-party system was established after 45 years of socialist and totalitarian government. A transition towards a pluralistic and democratic society is taking place.

Bulgarian political communication plays a role in the civil society; it continues to be a function of the state institutions and political parties. Political and civil rhetoric practices and influence have immensely grown during the Bulgarian civil protests and demonstrations (1989, 1990, 1996–1997). Political communication has transformed since 2010 and Bulgarian citizens vow their demands in more definite forms combining direct, media and virtual channels. Bulgarian citizens largely use the Internet as a tool for increased social activities in the civil society. The participants in the *protests* in Bulgaria (2012–2013) use Facebook as an instrument of civic activity and acceleration of the protests. The protesters use

Facebook as virtual tribune and Internet forums as virtual discussions where they raise topics and conduct dialogues.

2. *Hypothesis and research questions*

The hypothesis initiating the present search is that the argumentation in the Bulgarian political forums and social networks during the protests from 2010 to 2013 goes through different transformations as a result of technical, technological and social factors. In addition, the traditional kinds of arguments are transformed; virtual communication includes verbal, visual and multi-modal arguments and has achieved new forms of display. The manners and modes of presenting the ideas have changed as a result of the changes in the attitudes of the e-communicators and protesters. Bulgarian virtual civil communication has diverse forms of manifestation and characteristics.

The aim of the current study is to try to give answer the following research questions:

* What was the significance of virtual forums and social networks during the protests?
* Which are the main features of virtual forums?
* Which rhetorical figures, arguments and tools did the protesters use purposefully to convey their main messages, influence the public conscience of the citizens and mobilise them to support their ideas?
* How verbal, visual and multi-modal arguments create opportunities to persuade Bulgarians to participate more actively in the civil society events?

3. *Theoretical frame*

Aristotle has fundamental contribution to rhetoric and argumentation: *Rhetoric* (Aristotle, 1986) and *The Topics* (Aristotle, 1998) and the focus is on verbal manifestations of the arguments. Studies of rhetoric and argumentation have been conducted throughout the centuries and they have undergone a kind of renaissance in the 20th and 21st century. Stephen Toulmin published the book *The uses of argument* in 1958; Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca announce their position to give a new meaning to the rhetorical heritage in the book *The new rhetoric: A treatise on argumentation* (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst presented their standpoint concerning the argumentation in the book *A Systematic Theory of Argumentation. The Pragma-dialectical Approach* (Eemeren & Grootendorst,

2006). We will also draw on the basic definitions of the arguments and in particular the terms *Pro Homine, Ad Populum Arguments, Arguments from Authority, Arguments against Authority* explained by Leo Groarke and Christopher Tindale in the chapter "Ethotic Schemes" of the book *Good Reasoning Matters! A Constructive Approach to Critical Thinking* (Groarke & Tindale, 2012: pp. 307–340).

The studies of the arguments and argumentation have intensified in the latest two decades and scientists start to investigate visual arguments. Antony Blair published the article *The Possibility and Actuality of Visual Arguments* in 1996. The author continued developing the research on this topic and he published the article *The Rhetoric of Visual Arguments* in 2004. Other scientists have displayed their individual positions on visual arguments in a series of quality papers: *Outlines of a Theory of Visual Argument* (Birdsell & Groarke, 2008: pp. 103–113), *Iconicity in Visual and Verbal Argumentation* (Hoven, 2011, pp. 831–834) etc. Leo Groarke reconceptualises Toulmin's position and he expresses his position in the article *Five theses on Toulmin and visual argument* (Groarke, 2009: pp. 229–239). Leo Groarke and Christopher Tindale give a definition of visual arguments in the dictionary of the book *Good Reasoning Matters! A Constructive Approach to Critical Thinking: Visual arguments are arguments that convey premises and conclusions with non-verbal images one finds in drawing, photographs, films, videos, sculptures natural objects, and so on. In most cases they combine visual and verbal cues that can be understood as argument.* (Groarke & Tindale, 2012: p. 455). We are in agreement with the above definition, especially with the position that verbal and visual cues are combined to support the process of understanding the arguments and we will use it as a part of the theoretical background of this study. Other researchers have announced the results of researches on visual arguments. George Roque focuses on the political rhetoric in visual images (Roque, 2008: pp. 185–193). Jos van den Broek, Willam Koetsenruijter, Jaap de Jong, Letitia Smit write about the functions of the visual language (Broek et al., 2012: pp. 32–39). Jens Kjeldsen applies a cognitive, contextual, and reception-oriented approach analyzing the visual argumentation in Scandinavian political advertising (Kjeldsen, 2007: pp. 124–132) and he investigates the roles of visual tropes and figures as a way of creating visual argumentation again on the field of the advertising (Kjeldsen, 2012: pp. 239–255). All of them have their singular contributions to the theory of visual argument and the methodology of its research.

Following the principle of terminological clarity we will outline the concept 'multi-modal argument' as it is applied here in the terms of Leo Groarke who says that:

The fundamental reason for accepting multi-modal arguments is the root notion that an argument is an attempt to support a conclusion by presenting evidence for it – something that can clearly be done in ways that extend beyond premises and conclusions understood as declarative sentences. To take only a few examples, I may try to convince you of some claim by presenting photographs, drawing a map, pointing to something, telling a story (fiction or non-fiction), showing a film, painting a picture, and so on and so forth. Our lives are replete with situations in which evidence for some point of view is presented in these and other ways that do not neatly correspond to the verbal paradigm that was always stressed in traditional accounts of argument (Groarke, 2013: p. 34).

The author explains that:

At a time when the development of digital communication is making it easier to transmit images, sounds, and even physical sensations, it is not surprising that arguments increasingly incorporate non-verbal elements that can be communicated in this way. Especially in such a context, recognizing multi-modal arguments is one way to broaden the scope of our general account of argument, taking us one step further in the development of a thick theory (Groarke, 2013: p. 36).

For the purposes of this study will also give brief information about the other kinds of argumentation. Marcin Lewiński introduces and explains the terms 'argumentation design' and '*computer-mediated design*'. He presents in the table 3.1 the three different computer-mediated argumentation designs (de Moor & Aakhu, 2006: p. 97): *issue networking, funnelling, and reputation* (Lewiński, 2010: p. 38). The pattern 'provide quote or link' exists to use hyper-linking which is "a simple technological affordance that has become a vital part of online culture" and adds that this "entry level online-specific mode of attacking the propositional content of argumentation" (Lewiński, 2010: pp. 140–141).

We are in agreement with these statements and we will use these terms adapted to the aim if the current research.

4. *Research design*

My empirical sources for the present study are selected out of 4 sub-corpora

including the topic 'protests': Facebooks groups „Occupy Bulgaria", Протестна мрежа – Protestna Mreja – Protest network; sites 'Dance with me' http://www.danswithme.com/'', 'No Oresharski' http://noresharski.com/; 'Solidarnost' http://solidarnost.tv/public/life/goriva/; forums http://forum.clubpolitika.com/; http://www.investor.bg/forum/forumdisplay.php?f=11; hash tags #Оставка (#Retirement), #протест (#protest), #България (#Bulgaria), #Идвайте (#Come along).

The study is based on a grounded analysis of 200 posts and 200 posters, photos, parodies, caricatures from these sites selected from the period between January 2012 and December 2013 from 4 protests: against high prices and the national protest against outrage, against the monopolists of energy – December 2012 – January – April 2013, against the nomination of Peyeveski for the position of director of the State Agency of National Security (SANS) – 14 June 2013.

The specific features of virtual discussion, the behaviour of e-participants and the factors that determine the dialogues are outlined in the beginning of this study. After that the focus is on the sources of arguments, kinds of arguments and their specific uses in virtual forums and Facebook groups. The research includes analysis of five kinds of arguments – Argumentum ad Hominem, Pro Homine, Argument of Authority, Argument against Authority and Argumentum ad Populum on verbal, visual and multi-modal levels in virtual environments.

5. *Factors, sources and kinds of arguments*

In general social networks are the result of a couple of circumstances such as: developing and improving technological opportunities for communication; access to new ideas, web-based information, electronic resources and database serving millions of people the world over. This is valid for social networks used by Bulgarian citizens. The protesters broadcast the appeals and civil demands to virtual audiences and they try to persuade them for civic action using different kinds of arguments. Bulgarian virtual political forums contains posts, dialogues between e-communicators, and mix of rhetorical figures, verbal, visual and multi-modal arguments. Argumentation design and computer-mediated argumentation have changed, and words, terms and short sentences have been gradually mixed with visual and multi-modal arguments. The forms of the political communication of protesters found in the virtual environment are heterogeneous. The social networks and virtual forums play a significant role during the protests against the

politicians, governing classes, and the government itself; Bulgarians have moved from passive behaviour to active citizenship; from recipients of political messages to participants in the different formats of virtual communication. The virtual forums are transformed to a mixed format and it contains personal positions and critical discussions. In their turn, discussions between members the virtual political forums include some sub-dialogues on such topics as: government, political parties, political system, monopolists, oligarchy, connections between government and monopolists, law system, prices, ecology etc.

The analysis shows that most of the debaters prefer the reputation model which every participant in virtual forums is committed to follow while vowing their proposals and arguments, and thus has a personal stake in the process of argumentation. This argumentative design presupposes the frequent uses of personal civil experience and explicit defence of the main thesis based on one or two items of proof.

We can generalize that the participants of the forums did not use too many and too different arguments. They preferred the following sources: dictionaries, history, statistics, blogs, media and in particular online media, social networks, legal documents, and personal experience. The *netizens* explained the origin of the proofs. The pattern 'provide quote or link' is generally applied and shows clearly the source of arguments. E-debaters use this pattern as an ethotic argument and they demonstrate the credibility of the proof. Some of the participants have adopted their argumentative and digital competence in the forums. Bulgarian netizens as participants in the Facebook groups prefer short sentences, and verbal expressions are typical features of the appeals; they consist of negative connotations, polar evaluations of the state institutions, political leaders, big corporations which are monopolists in Bulgarian business spheres and market. From argumentative standpoint the telegraphic style is appropriate during the virtual discussions; the e-communicators posted short messages on the walls of Facebook groups because they understand that the Bulgarian citizens avoid complicated argumentation. Written and visual arguments on the wall of Facebook groups are displayed in front of hundreds or thousands of people in Bulgaria and Bulgarians the world over. Some of the arguments are created spontaneously by protesters; most of them are selected from personal experience and they are acceptable for most citizens who avoid the sophisticated argumentation style of the Bulgarian politicians. The topics of virtual forums are

initiated by netizens and the communication is carried out on horizontal level. The positions are presented by netizens who accept the Facebook groups as virtual tribune and they combine the arguments according the situation and concrete aims. The freedom of speech, the digital competence and the active citizens' behaviour establish new opportunities for virtual civil communication in Bulgaria after 2012.

6. *Verbal arguments*

The protesters in Bulgaria accept the Internet as an instrument of mobilisation and organisation; they post messages, publish about events and call up activities on the wall of Facebook groups and in the virtual forums. During the summer protests in 2013 e-citizens started to use hash tag # and some of these groups were #Оставка (#Retirement), #протест (#protest), #България (#Bulgaria), #Идвайте (#Come along). Virtual civil oratory includes clear words, short sentences and the leaders of the protests avoid sophisticated verbal style. The protesters include new terms in their messages, most protesters are anonymous authors in the social networks but they identify themselves in the virtual forums. Most protesters have argumentative skills and digital competence.

Verbal Pro Homine Argument has relatively new application in virtual civil communication in Bulgaria. The protesters see themselves as moral, competent and active citizens. From their point of view civil society could develop better and more effectively if the politicians and state institutions accept their idea for: *civil participation in the decision making process, institutionalization of the civil participation, and civil control over state institutions.* The protesters demonstrate maturity and they focus on some suggestions in connection with the elections concerning their transparency and outlining a modern way to organise the national election campaign. The e-communicators present in the virtual forms the arguments supporting their civil demands: *equal access to media during election campaigns, new organization of the elections including new kind of voter lists and new electoral rolls; transparency with regard to the connection between parties, institutions and corporations, two mandates as a member of the Parliament, new Constitution, etc*. These arguments are not a part of the sophisticated ideological communication; they are proofs of a process of growing conscious activities of the civil society in Bulgaria.

Other kinds of verbal arguments are found on the posters and they are posted on the Facebooks walls by Bulgarians who live and study abroad. E-communicators

used a combination of Argument from Authority and the Ad Populum Argument. They accept themselves as Bulgarian citizens and they support the protesters: *We are away but we support you. We are with you. From Spain", "Students from Manchester are with you*". They have arrived at the conclusion that they are netizens and that the frontiers and barriers are past because social networks create good opportunities to express their positions as Bulgarian citizens. The sense of belonging is effect of this persuasion. Virtual civil citizenship is a new phenomenon in the contemporary Bulgarian political life. Verbal argumentation related to it reveals in new circumstances.

Verbal Argument against Authority is preferred by the protesters when they want to express their disappointment with Bulgarian politicians. For example they write on their Facebook wall: *„You are not sufficiently intelligent to manage us", „Go voluntarily! You have a choice now! Next we shall use force!"*. Some of these verbal arguments were created during the street protests, the messages and arguments were shared very rapidly across social networks. Other slogans and arguments were written online and e-communicators broadcast them to protesters. It is possible to conclude that there are two ways to share the arguments: from street to social networks and from social networks to square demonstrations. We can go to the assumption that it is a relatively new manifestation of *argumentation design* and *computer-mediated design*.

Most of the protesters have profiles in social networks, so they create virtual groups. Digital Bulgarian citizens publish posts, photos, video clips; they share and broadcast them across the social networks. The dialogue takes up three different levels: real, virtual and a combination between the two. For example, an expert in psychology who is a member of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) evaluates the e-citizens as '*internet vagabonds*', '*internet lumpens*' and he abuses them. The Argumentum ad Hominem activates the protesters who write on the posters and on the wall of the social network Facebook the following slogans: "*I am not an Internet lumpen*!". The protesters combine Argumentum ad Hominem with analogy and they compare the politicians from BSP with politicians from Egypt, Turkey and China who limit the access to the Internet and appreciate the social networks as tools for mobilising citizens during the protests. The Bulgarian protesters understand that the social networks create broad opportunities for them to be active digital citizens yet at the same time they insult the psychologist named him "psycho", "red rubbish" etc. The Argumentum ad Hominem is used by

the politician against virtual groups which are fluid but the protesters prefer personalization and they direct the Argumentum ad Hominem against one man.

Summarising, we can draw the conclusion that different kinds of verbal arguments created by the protesters have wide application in virtual space and the argumentative skills developed offline are shifted and transferred online.

7. *Visual arguments*

Visual Argument *Pro Homine* is not used by the protesters very often but it has proven very effective. The portrait of Vassil Levski, one of the celebrated historical figures of Bulgaria, is preferable to construct argument Pro Homine. The charisma of Levski as a leader from the Bulgarian Revival (and to be more precise from the late 19th century) is a solid argument and it persuades Bulgarians to be more active citizens and netizens. On the poster published on the Facebook wall the title "National protest against outrages" is combined with the portrait of Vassil Levski and Levski's appeal "Трябва да се жертва всичко, па и себе си" ("Everybody should sacrifice everything, even himself").

The scheme of Argument *Pro Homine* is presented by Leo Groarke and Christopher Tindale:

Promise 1: X says y.
Promise 2: X is knowledgeable, trustworthy, and free of bias.
Conclusion: y should be accepted." (Groarke & Tindale 2012: 308).

The scheme of the visual argument presented on the Facebook wall is the same:

Promise 1: Levski says that we should sacrifice everything in the name of our freedom.
Promise 2. Levski is knowledgeable Bulgarian hero, notable and moral man.
Conclusion: The appeal to sacrifice in the favour of Bulgaria should be acceptable.

The second poster includes the same type of argument and the protesters use the portrait of Ivan Vazov who is a famous Bulgarian writer and poet from the 20th century. The portrait is used to help reach the conclusion that the protest will change the situation in Bulgaria in the second decade of the 21st century.

When the aim is to consolidate and reinforce the persuasive effect, the protesters combine two portraits constructing Visual Argument Pro Homine and combine it

with analogy. The protesters use the portraits of political leader Levski and patriotic writer Vazov and they add the verbal messages: *Bulgaria for Bulgarians. Levski and Vazov are heroes. Go and support them!*

To take another example, the octopus is a preferable visual proof to persuade virtual audience that the oligarchy and mafia control the economy in Bulgaria. This visual sign has the role of an *Argument against Authority*. E-protesters use the faces of politicians and they combine them with the octopus. The memory about the Italian movie "Octopus" (*La Piovra*), which is very popular in Bulgaria, supports the persuasive effect.

One and the same visual element can have different argumentative uses depending on the virtual communicator's aim. For example a map of Bulgaria is used both as an *Argument from Authority* and as an *Argument against Authority*. In the case when the protesters has positive attitudes as Bulgarian citizens they use the coloured map or combine the map with the official flag or with the state emblem. They try to persuade Bulgarians that we can be proud of our country and that the official sings express that we are citizens of an independent state. On the contrary when the protesters prefer to express negative connotation and to reveal the lack of morality and ethics of Bulgarian politicians, they use the map painted only in black and white. Additionally they transform the picture of the map using Photoshop and they give it the form of a sheep combining it with the written words and figures of politicians, banks, monopolists who milk the state visually presented as a sheep.

Another preferred symbol used as visual *Argumentum ad Hominem* is a hat. The hats used as visual elements fall into three groups: the first one is typical for a soldier of the Soviet Army and Sergey Stanishev as leader of the Bulgarian Socialistic Party is wearing it, Volen Siderov as a leader of the nationalistic party is wearing a hat typical for Nazi soldiers and Lyutvi Mestan as a leader of the ethnic party of the Turkish minority has a red fez.

Summarising, we can say that visual arguments have persuasive effect and Bulgarians accept them as an interesting manner to lay civil demands in front of hundreds of citizens.

8. *Multi-modal arguments*

The persuasive power of multi-modal arguments posted during the protests on

Facebook walls or in virtual forums is great.

In the beginning of our study of multi-modal arguments we selected 3 posters from the corpora which contain the element 'index finger' used as a combination of Argument from Authority and the Ad Populum Argument. The application of two arguments is an appeal for mobilisation, taking an active position and participation in the political processes.

In the first poster the visual element 'index finger' is combined with the verbal appeal „Спрете да се оплаквате от държавата! Променете я! Защото вие сте държавата!" (Stop complaining about the state! Change it! Because you are the state!"). The sentences look like a paraphrase of Kennedy's appeal "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country".

E-protesters use index finger which directs to active position combining well-known visual element and figures from a different age, state and political system. In the second and third posters the protesters have paraphrased the celebrated posters from the USA and the Soviet Union and they are used too but in Bulgarian political and virtual contexts. Uncle Sam encourages them to take part in the street protests or to paint monuments from the socialism as a way to express their position against the manipulation by the government of the Bulgarian Socialist Party which is a part of the government (June 2013-August 2014): „Ти истински демократ ли си или не? Боядиса ли днес паметник?" ("Are you a true democrat or not? Have you painted a monument today"). A young soldier from the Red Soviet Army pointed towards the viewer and said in English "What do you occupy?"

Parallel and analogy support persuasion because the multi-modal arguments are decoded easily and fast, despite the mixture of historical periods. The multi-modal arguments combine Argument of Authority and Argument Ad Populum and the digital competence and display skills of the protesters and netizens make the argumentation more impressive and persuasive. The E-protesters have digital and IT competences and they prefer to paraphrase and adapt the posters from famous USA movies creating new kind of argument. The combinations of politicians' faces are different and the creators of the posters express negative attitudes while they use multi-modal variants of Argumentum ad Hominem against the political leaders.

One of them is based on the movie "Miserable". The faces are of Oresharski – prime-minister, Ahmed Dogan – former leader of the Movement for rights and freedom, Volen Siderov – nationalistic party leader, and socialist leader Sergey Stanishev. A second poster displays the faces of 10 political leaders, two Bulgarian presidents and state men in the place of the heroes of the movie „Ocean's Eleven". The multi-modal Argument ad Hominem is not against one politician but against the politicians from all parties, and it is a specific manifestation of attitude in the context of the protests because Bulgarians are disappointed with the political elite and accept that socio political manipulation of the broad public is a result of the lobby activities of certain leaders, and that Bulgarian politicians have stopped working on the common ideals coming into reality. This multi-modal Argumentum ad Hominem has had powerful effect on the protesters.

Argumentum ad Hominem has some other manifestation on the multi-modal level of application. A particular explication of this argument is directed against political leaders and the posters published online present the waltz dance of the political leaders Sergey Stanishev (the Bulgarian Socialist Party – BSP), Volen Siderov (Nationalistic party 'Ataka') and Lyutvi Mestan (the Movement of Rights and Freedom – MRF – ethnic party), Boyko Borosov (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria – CEDB). The political context is that lobbyism, lacking in transparency and coulisse negotiations and stipulations make the dialogue between politicians and citizens difficult. The visual image is enlarged; it combines with verbal Argument ad Populum *„Dance with me to the end of BSP, MRF, Ataka, CEDB".*

Multi-modal argument has been used quite recently in virtual civic communication, digitalisation and new kind of behaviour of the social networks accelerating its manifestations.

9. *Conclusion*

Most Bulgarian protesters are citizens in the traditional sense, and at the same time they are netizens who accept virtual forums and Facebook groups as a place where they discuss the topics initiated by them. Most participants in the virtual forums have digital competences and they combine them with good argumentative skills applicable in virtual environments. They follow the good practices of the computer-mediated design; they prefer the pattern 'provide quote or link' because it is a way to confirm that they use correctly the sources of

arguments because credibility is an important factor to persuade virtual audiences.

The netizens avoid verbosity and prefer a combination of two or three arguments. The virtual debaters in the forums often use Argumentum ad Hominem, Argumentum ad Populum, Argument against Authority. It is reasonable because the protesters want to persuade hundreds of people of Bulgaria that the politicians do not follow moral principles and they have stopped working in favour of the citizens and the country. The protesters use Pro Homine Argument and Argument for Authority picturing themselves as moral people, active citizens and members of the civil society in Bulgaria. The virtual audience easy decodes and understands the sense; the ethotic arguments have strong persuasive effect.

Bulgarian citizens gradually improve their argumentative skills and take part in the political virtual forums; they mix verbal and visual arguments and create multi-modal arguments. The protesters appreciate virtual forums as *virtual agora* or *e-agora* as some researchers prefer to call it avoiding etymological ambiguity based on the meaning of virtue (Apostolova 2014: 71), the dialogue is semi-formal, and the argumentation is simple. The freedom of speech and new technological circumstances determine a new model of behaviour, new attitudes to write, prepare, design, share and broadcast very easily and fast the information and argumentation across the social networks.

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