Attitudes Towards Framed Communication of Political Parties in North Macedonia During Second Wave COVID 19 Through the Lenses of Supporters

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Abstract. The appearance of COVID19 triggered governments to start managing the crises through communicating centers to influence the perception of public. One part of crisis management was through political communication. The aim of this paper is to explore whether there are differences among opposing party members in perception of political communication in times of crises. Media headlines from both parties were evaluated about degree to agreeableness with each statement by the members. The sample consisted of members of two largest political parties from the Macedonian bloc VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM (50 members from each party). The analysis was done through t-test comparison of attitudes towards message between party members. The results show that each party member supports their own party framed communication. Main conclusion is that there is a difference in perception of political communication related to COVID-19 which is in favor of own political affiliation. The findings provide a solid base for crisis management through political communication in uncertain situations.

Keywords. Framed communication; political communication; Covid-19; party membership; supporters

1. Introduction

Beliefs about Covid-19 are regarded complex as there have been different public reactions to understanding the virus. One part accepted the announcements from the WHO and the authorities, while another part showed disbelief in the existence of the virus, implying problem awareness. Political parties, especially those in power, needed to set up references. The purpose was to ease the interpretation presented to the public [1]. The existence of COVID-19 enabled political parties to play with public sentiment even more easily because the public did not not know how to choose relevant benchmarks in this new situation. Previous research has found that political leaders can influence how seriously people take a problem and this is a case for party members or supporters [2], [3]. Scholars already verified that the public instinctively uses heuristics to reduce the burden of decision-making [4], especially on issues like COVID-19, where

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there is an apparent disconnect between scientific understanding and mass competence [5]. However, those signals are often unreliable and prone to cognitive bias. When voters act on signals given by their preferred political party and selective exposure to preferred media or preferred sources [6], they may do so automatically.

"The pictures in our heads", to borrow Walter Lippmann's famous phrase [7] are shaped less by factual knowledge and more by various other factors that are not easily controlled, such as personal experience and chosen cues from the real world. People's perception of risk (in this case of COVID-19) is not only determined by the scientific information they receive or their physical experiences. Vai et al. [8] points to the media that shape public risk perception as a critical factor influencing risk perception. They also highlight the different types of media factors that influence public risk perception, such as the type of media, the amount and tone of coverage, and the credibility of the source. More specific to this research are political identities that also take part in cognitive factors towards risk perception [1]. As political identities shape components of cognition, political psychology offers irrefutable evidence that partisan identities alter political thinking and reasoning [9] on political cognition [10] and social themes [11]. Therefore, the aim of this research is to explore whether there are differences among opposing party members in perception of political communication in times of COVID-19 crises.

2. Influence of political affiliation

Opposing views of political polarization maintain influence on political behavior within developed countries and developing democracies [12]. In Republic of N. Macedonia, political membership is large and highly polarized [13] and tends to imply an impressive influence on the range of political behavior. According to some data, Jovanovska and Božinovska claim that 13 percent of citizens in Macedonia are members of one of the three largest parties: VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM or DUI.

Party membership represents a form of group identity that shapes the behavior of the individual towards the group and outside it. The polarization in relation to the opponents increases through the introduction of strong rhetoric and is supported by media [14]. Thus, a polarized political climate is characterized by "a high level of ideological distance between parties and a high level of homogeneity within parties" [15]. Certain authors [16] point to the fact that political parties in Macedonia constantly use polarized discourse as a populist strategy that builds the basis of division more thoroughly. The theory of political polarization proves that as the opposition of political parties increases over a certain issue, their respective ideological identification designations will become more distinct and thus more easily recognized by their members [17]. Attitudes of parties constantly seek to occupy the importance of a certain issue or problem [18], and this creates additional impact on polarized public opinion. However, if there is unification of party attitudes, as the Canadian example [19] (usage of unifying discourse and overcome party short term interests), then political differences are reduced and there is some cooperation. The specific public that recognizes the source of the message will be willing to interpret the message with party perspective [20]. As some authors [21] note, party cues may not indicate the character of politics, but they do indicate party groups that are important. Through such behavior the parties tend to encourage the public to judge the ultimate impressions through an ideological prism of politics [21]. The findings relate to a study that found [22] influence of emotions in

organizational context. Also, it was [23] found that exposure to candidate rumors is positively related to belief in said rumors for members of both parties, but the relationship is significantly stronger when the rumors are attitudinally congruent. Thus [24] it is demonstrated that rumors are more effectively corrected by subjects who argue against their political interests than by sources who might be expected to oppose the content. Research shows [25] that subjects tended to distrust scientific evidence when presented as subject to party disputes. A review of research on this topic finds that party signals in media coverage about politics contribute to polarization that increases the visibility of party views. Politically biased media have been extensively studied. In one [15] experiment, which was conducted by manipulating the types of arguments (weak and strong arguments), as well as information about the level of opposition between two opposing political parties, the results showed a trend toward following stronger arguments, but also the consistency of the argument, regardless of its strength if it shows the party. The abovementioned provide a basis for the problem of interest of this study. The main hypothesis is that there is a difference in perception of political communication related to COVID-19 which is in favor of own political affiliation.

3. Methodology

The research uses a convenient sample composed of 50 members of the opposition party VMRO-DPMNE and 50 members of the ruling party SDSM who are older than 18 years. The data was collected through a questionnaire placed on Google Forms. The study was conducted in the period of March 20, 2021, to June 5, 2021. The total number of respondents was 100 (50% males and 50 % females from both subsamples of members). All variables, except demographics, were measured using a self-evaluation scale corresponding to a Likert scale. The questions are evaluation of political statements given by members of parties in the media. The questionnaire consisted of an evaluation of each statement (media headline) on a 1 to 5 scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. This approach was used to measure the attitudes towards politicians from both political parties. The participants of both parties were shown media titles from their own and opposing party. This included a total of 18 media titles, i.e. 9 of SDSM and 9 of VMRO-DPMNE. To test the proposed hypothesis, a T-test for independent groups was used e.g., the analysis consisted of comparison of attitudes between members of opposing parties for own media headlines and for media headlines of opposing party.

4. Results

The data from the analyzed survey questionnaire shows significant results for each of the variables according to the hypothesis. For this purpose, two tables for each of the messages are presented with comparison of attitudes of members of both parties.

Table 1. Comparison of attitudes between members of SDSM party and members of VMRO-DPMNE party towards quotes with framed messages by VMRO-DPMNE

Aspects	Average SDSM members	of SD	Average VMRO-DPMNE members	of SD	P value
1. VMRO-DPMNE: Zaev and Filipche let the situation with the pandemic out of control a long time ago (24 TV, 05.10.2020)	1.44	0.20	3.84	0.20	**p<0.05**
2. VMRO-DPMNE: Citizens suffer from the government's inability to deal with Covid-19 (Plusinfo, 18.10.2020)	1.42	0.19	3.64	0.14	**p<0.05**
3. VMRO-DPMNE: Every fourth person tested is infected, the government is doing nothing to prevent an even bigger disaster (Plusinfo, 20.10.2020)	1.53	0.19	3.72	0.17	**p<0.05**
4. VMRO DPMNE: The government should overcome vanity and elect a new Commission for Infectious Diseases (Plusinfo, 23.10.2020)	1.8	0.19	3.7	0.17	**p<0.05**
5. VMRO-DPMNE demands the resignation of Minister Filipce (Focus, 27.10.2020)	1.41	0.22	2.51	0.16	**p<0.05**
6. VMRO-DPMNE: The government of SDSM and Zaev is not capable of managing the economic and health crisis (Channel 5, 15.11.2020)	1.69	0.18	3.23	0.18	**p<0.05**
7. VMRO-DPMNE: Filipce is the biggest problem for the corona crisis in the country, resignation immediately (Sitel, 20.11. 2020)	1.38	0.22	3	0.14	**p<0.05**
8. VMRO-DPMNE ACCUSES: The measures are a lie and PR (Sitel, 15.12.2020)	1.65	0.21	2.3	0.19	**p<0.05**
9. VMRO-DPMNE: The peak of the corona virus does not pass as well as the incompetence that means death for the people (A1 ON, 04.12.2020)	1.81	0.27	3.38	0.20	**p<0.05**

The messages sent by the political party VMRO-DPMNE, shown in table 1, offer evidence (p<0.05) in all 9 cases that members of the opposite party or SDSM do not agree with their contents (message) and are supported by own members (VMRO-DPMNE).

Table 2. Comparison of attitudes between members of SDSM party and members of VMRO-DPMNE party towards quotes with framed messages by SDSM

Aspects	Average SDSM members	of SD	Average VMRO-DPMNE members	of SD	P value
1. Filipche accused VMRO-DPMNE of blocking: The virus does not wait, the measures must be adopted urgently! (Focus, 21.10.2020)	3.79	0.23	2.00	0.15	**p<0.05**
2. SDSM: If VMRO-DPMNE had not requested a postponement, the measures would have been passed in the Parliament (Nova TV, 22.10.2020)	3.87	0.23	1.76	0.16	**p<0.05**

3. SDSM: Since the beginning of the pandemic, VMRO-DPMNE has been holding back all efforts to deal with the crisis (Focus, 31.10.2020)	2	0.18	1.5	0.21	**p<0.05**
4. SDSM: Mickoski remains on the side of the coronavirus and acts dangerously for the health of citizens (Nova TV, 09.11.2020)	3.62	0.18	1.4	0.21	**p<0.05**
5. SDSM: VMRO-DPMNE blocked funds for 16 covid-centers, reducing the victims of coronavirus to numbers (MIA, 16.11.2020)	4.4	0.17	1.83	0.22	**p<0.05**
6. SDSM: The hypocritical VMRO-DPMNE and Mickoski feign concern (Channel 5, 16.11.2020)	3.83	0.19	1.7	0.20	**p<0.05**
7. SDSM: VMRO-DPMNE is abusing the misfortune of citizens infected with the coronavirus (MIA 17.11.2020)	3.7	0.17	1.5	0.17	**p<0.05**
8. SDSM: Mickoski secretly rejoices at the number of deceased (Sitel, 19.11.2020)	3.25	0.18	1.34	0.22	**p<0.05**
9. SDSM: VMRO-DPMNE feigns concern and violates measures to protect against Covid (24 TV, 17.12.2020)	3.73	0.20	1.9	0.20	**p<0.05**

The messages sent by the political party SDSM, shown in table 2, represent a difference ($p<0.05$) in all 9 cases for motivated party reasoning, where members of the same party SDSM support the statements. Members from the opposition party VMRO-DPMNE disagree with the messages.

5. Discussion

The overall result is that each party member supports their own party framed communication e.g., when it comes to the media quotes whose message framing originates from the opposing party, there is a difference in supporter's attitudes. Each party member supports the framed communication of the party they favor, while at the same time highly oppose and disagree with framed communication of the opposing party. Mostly, the accumulated data using the framed messages in both groups indicates that the views of the political members are in line with the intention of the message to provoke opposition [26]. The conclusion is that there is a difference in perception of political communication related to COVID-19 which is in favor of own political affiliation.

Accordingly, the research confirmed the polarized attitudes among members of political parties in a communication environment where fragmented political information encourages and maintains polarization [26]. The research supported the thesis about the existence of differences in attitudes toward framed communication of politicians who are in the position between members of the party in power and members of the party in opposition. Therefore, political parties should take greater steps regarding the strategic management of political information. The results from this study are in line with research that shows how information obtained from different sources significantly influences the formation of public attitudes and beliefs [27]. The study contributes to the effect of polarization e.g., the tendency of the opposition not to support the policy that is proposed by those in position, and vice versa [18], as was the case in this study. The abovementioned finding is interpreted through the prism of politicization of existing opinion where political members accept and support the position that originates from the

elites of their preferred political party. As such, information obtained from political sources not only provides information about the surrounding world, but also enables the interpretation of that information [28]. According to some authors [29], political members are motivated to protect their identity and choose its continuity, thus becoming more motivated to view the competing party in a more negative light.

6. Conclusions

The conclusions that stem out from the research are that there is a highly polarized climate which is characterized by usage of polarized discourse as a populist strategy. Again, the theory of political polarization proves that as the opposition of political parties increases over a certain issue, their own affiliations play a role when it comes to attitudes. source. The results are due to the political identities of these specific groups and their affiliation which is fed by polarized climate.

The findings are significant for political communication and communication in crisis by the state. The conclusions point out that members of political parties need to take polarization into account when framing the messages in times of crises. This can be achieved through using cognitive arguments that sound reasonable to members of both parties. Also, by using ideological cues and frames, political parties can fundamentally change the way that the same public perceives various issues. On the other hand, both parties need to use a unifying discourse and overcome party short term interests in front of public interests. Regarding limitations, the study uses convenience sampling and due to this selection method, the results should be taken with some caution. A change in the reasoning and motivation of such behaviors may occur due to different reasons and therefore further research into potential variations is necessary. However, the obtained data provides nuances of knowledge about effects of political communication and its impact on opinion formation in risky environments.

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