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Beyond ‘TikTokcracy’

Tracking Political Influence on Social Media

BULGARIA’S 2026 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION



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1 Executive Summary

The presidential election campaign on social media has been accompanied by coordinated and artificially amplified activity, although on a smaller scale than before the parliamentary elections in the spring of 2026. This is the main finding of the report Beyond TikTokcracy: Tracking Political Influence on Social Media. Bulgaria's 2026 Presidential Election.

The report primarily covers the period from August 20 to October 21, 2026, including approximately one month before the start of the official election campaign, in order to capture the social media activity leading up to it. Unless otherwise specified, the aggregate figures presented refer to this period.

The report documents coordinated dissemination benefiting the five leading presidential tickets: Iliana Iotova and Kiril Valchev; Andrey Gyurov and Georgi Kandev; Kostadin Kostadinov and Petar Volgin; Radostin Vasilev and Krasimir Manov; and Ivelin Mihaylov and Yuliana Mateeva. In Gyurov's case, three anonymous TikTok accounts presenting themselves as a civic "resistance" movement attack the government and publish positive content about Gyurov and Kandev. Between one-fifth and one-third of their videos focus on the ticket, while other opposition candidates are almost entirely absent. No direct connection to the ticket's official campaign has been established.

The tactics used include:

- repurposed audiences on Facebook;
- automated Telegram channels, with Russia-linked networks amplifying some of the messages on the platform;
- networks of anonymous "media outlets" on TikTok that repost each other's content;
- identical comments under media posts;
- hashtags combining Cyrillic and Latin characters, introduced simultaneously by Vazrazhdane's official account and its content distribution hubs. Specialized monitoring tools that rely on exact text matches do not detect these variants. The presumed aim is to make automated monitoring more difficult.

The report's main findings are as follows:

Repurposed Audiences

Facebook groups originally created around topics such as protests, travel, or opposition to the euro have subsequently been renamed to include the names of certain presidential candidates. The largest such network, centered around Nikolay Barekov and the BNews website (approximately 320,000 members), includes groups devoted to various high-profile issues that are eventually renamed to suit particular campaigns. For example, two groups were renamed on the same day to express support for Iotova.

Group administrators have published two-thirds of the posts in these groups. However, no direct connection between the network and Iotova's campaign has



been established. Searches for candidate and party names were conducted consistently across all political camps. Mapping shared administrators revealed that the largest number of networks is associated with Progressive Bulgaria (PB) and Iotova, which is why this political camp was mapped in greater detail.

Continuity of Party Audiences

Groups associated with Gyurov are drawing on audiences previously built around We Continue the Change. The largest of these groups, with approximately 50,000 members, was originally created to support Kiril Petkov.

A Gap in Iotova's TikTok Presence

Progressive Bulgaria's TikTok network has largely fallen silent. As of October 13, 2026, an account believed to have been managed by Iotova's team in an earlier period is no longer accessible.

Anonymous TikTok Accounts Supporting and Opposing the Government

Several TikTok accounts present themselves as independent media outlets or civic movements without disclosing who is behind them. This anonymity is observed both among accounts supporting Iotova's campaign and among those siding with her main opponent, Gyurov. Four such "media outlets" follow the government's agenda, publish on a shared schedule and cover the same topics, and repost one another's content. The three "resistance" accounts use similar tactics and are the most active in the monitored TikTok sample, having published 544 videos. The anonymous accounts have engagement ratios below or at the lower end of the normal range (2.4% to 3.9%), while official and openly partisan accounts associated with Gyurov, MECH, and Vazrazhdane fall within or above that range (4.1% to 8.9%). This difference alone does not establish whether the engagements are organic or artificially stimulated.

Automation on Telegram

The Sunny Sunshine account is the most active contributor across the entire monitoring dataset. A total of 1,275 posts across six groups associated with Vazrazhdane have been attributed to this account. Posts from the same series frequently appear in different groups within the same second. However, the groups are small and their reach is limited.

Overlap With Russian Networks on Telegram

The telegram groups associated with Vazrazhdane and Bulgarian-language channels linked to Russian networks publish identical texts, on average four minutes apart. A manual review identified 48 such cases. In 28 cases, the text appeared first in groups associated with Vazrazhdane. In another 14 cases, it appeared first in sources linked to Russian networks. The sequence could not be established in the remaining 6 cases. The monitored sources include the Telegram channel of Vazrazhdane deputy chairman Tsoncho Ganev and the website efir.info, which is linked to News Front. The observed posting sequence does not establish who authored the texts, the direction in which they were shared, or whether the networks were jointly coordinated. Separately, the Bulgarian-language Telegram channel of News Front, a media outlet



sanctioned by the United States and the European Union, is blocked in Bulgaria. However, its website directs readers to “България ZOV” (Bulgaria ZOV), which it presents as its own channel.

Hashtags

TikTok accounts use hashtags that mix Cyrillic and Latin characters. These variants appear in content published by both Vazrazhdane’s official account and its content distribution hubs. Monitoring systems that search for exact text matches do not detect these hashtags. This suggests that their purpose may be to make automated monitoring more difficult.

Doppelgänger Website

A pro-Russian network of Facebook groups (with approximately 179,000 members) directs users to dstandart.com, a website that imitates the newspaper Standart. The site displays different content to online platforms and to readers.

Distrust of Voting Machines

Between August 28 and October 16, 2026, a total of 149 identical comments posted under content from 22 national media outlets promoted a narrative about a “global election cartel” involving A-WEB and Smartmatic. The narrative did not gain traction, but distrust of voting machines is also present in ordinary comments, some of which call for an election boycott.

AI-Generated Kyuchek Dance Videos

AI-generated videos of politicians dancing kyuchek are among the most-viewed election-related content, with the most popular video reaching 1 million views on TikTok. Since August 2, 2026, the AI Act requires such content to be labeled, but TikTok’s label is barely visible.

State Funding for a Channel Without an Audience

Ten of the 27 presidential tickets have contracts with TV “Справедлива България” (Fair Bulgaria), totaling EUR 134,400 in state-funded media packages. Videos featuring the candidates rarely receive more than 100 views. Seven of the ten tickets have documented connections either to the parties that formed the Fair Bulgaria coalition in 2022 or to one another.

Most of these practices do not violate platform rules. Coordinated inauthentic behavior is not defined under European Union law, and the same operation may violate the rules of one platform while being permitted on another.

At a roundtable organized by the Communications Regulation Commission on September 16, the European Commission, the Central Election Commission (CEC), the Council for Electronic Media, the Commission for Personal Data Protection, the General Directorate for Combating Organized Crime, nongovernmental organizations (including BFMI and Sensika), and the platforms TikTok, Meta, Google, and X agreed that legislative changes and greater coordination among relevant institutions, NGOs, and platforms are

needed. There is still no information about specific actions taken during this election cycle.



2 Context and Environment

Bulgaria's presidential election takes place on October 25, 2026, with a runoff on November 1. A total of 27 presidential tickets have been registered (the full list is available in the Central Election Commission's register). Incumbent President Iliana Iotova is running with Kiril Valchev. She was nominated by an initiative committee and is backed by Progressive Bulgaria. Andrey Gyurov and Georgi Kandev are supported by We Continue the Change and Democratic Bulgaria. The report also covers the tickets of Kostadin Kostadinov and Petar Volgin (Vazrazhdane), Radostin Vasilev and Krasimir Manov (MECH), Ivelin Mihaylov and Yuliana Mateeva (Velichie), as well as several smaller sovereigntist candidacies.

2.1 Political Context

These are the first presidential elections since Rumen Radev left the presidency to enter party politics. His newly formed party, Progressive Bulgaria, won a majority in the April 2026 snap parliamentary elections, and Radev took office as prime minister. The elections were called after Rosen Zhelyazkov's government (GERB-SDS), which governed in coalition with BSP and ITN, resigned on December 11, 2025. The resignation followed some of the largest protests in recent years, sparked by the draft 2026 budget. Bulgaria held seven rounds of snap parliamentary elections over a five-year period.

2.2 Media and Geopolitical Developments

Events before and during the campaign are an integral part of social media discussions surrounding the presidential election.

- The protests against successive governments and Delyan Peevski between 2023 and 2025, along with the debate over the Bulgarian lev following the introduction of the euro on January 1, 2026, have left behind established audiences and contentious issues that candidates are now repurposing.
- The campaign is dominated by the scandal surrounding the pardon of a convicted drug trafficker, signed by Iotova in her capacity as vice president in 2022. This is the most widely discussed issue in the analyzed data.
- The dispute over the Shipka monument in late September 2026 marked the high point of Kostadinov's campaign.
- The campaign is taking place against the backdrop of the war between the United States and Iran, which has driven up fuel prices and inflation.
- The war in Ukraine is the main dividing issue in the analyzed data. Radev's government advocates for "peace through diplomacy," while Iotova continues this approach with calls for a "coalition for peace." Critics of Iotova and Progressive Bulgaria argue that this position avoids explicitly naming Russia as the aggressor.
- Drone attacks against ships in Bulgaria's exclusive economic zone on October 6 and 13, 2026, bring the war to the center of the election campaign.
- The youth protests that began in Paris have spread across Europe. According to the analyzed data, these developments have also influenced protest sentiment on Bulgarian social media in the days leading up to the election. Protests have already taken place

against the government's policy on Ukraine, while young doctors have also demonstrated to demand fair pay.

3 Scope and Approach

The report follows the approach used in Tracker #2, produced by Sensika Technologies in collaboration with the Balkan Free Media Initiative (BFMI). It examines how political content spreads, the indicators of coordination and inauthentic behavior, the topics being amplified, and who benefits from the observed patterns. The analysis focuses on how content is disseminated rather than on verifying the accuracy of individual claims.

The analysis covers nearly 70,000 posts and videos published between August 20 and October 21, 2026, from more than 6,000 unique sources: over 31,000 on Facebook, 14,000 on X, 10,900 on Telegram, 8,700 on YouTube, 3,000 on TikTok, and 1,700 on Instagram. The platforms recorded more than 1 million comments under these posts. The sample consists of publicly available content collected through keyword and hashtag searches, as well as research into public profiles, pages, groups, and channels. It does not capture all election-related content and is not representative of all content on any individual platform.

In addition to content volume, the analysis tracks automatically assessed sentiment. The highest share of negative content was recorded on X (approximately 67%), followed by Facebook (61%) and Telegram (58%). The share was lower on YouTube (50%), TikTok (42%), and Instagram (35%). The assessment reflects the sentiment of the text itself, not necessarily its attitude toward a particular candidate.

The analysis combines an overview of the monitored content with targeted manual research into specific accounts, groups, posts, and networks. The initial overview establishes the scale of the discussions, while the targeted samples make it possible to trace how content spreads.

Coordinated inauthentic behavior refers to the use of accounts, pages, or networks to create the appearance of organic popularity. Coordination alone is not sufficient to establish inauthentic behavior. The analysis distinguishes between openly coordinated activist or party activity and patterns involving undisclosed operators, shared posting schedules, repeated texts, or concealed affiliations.

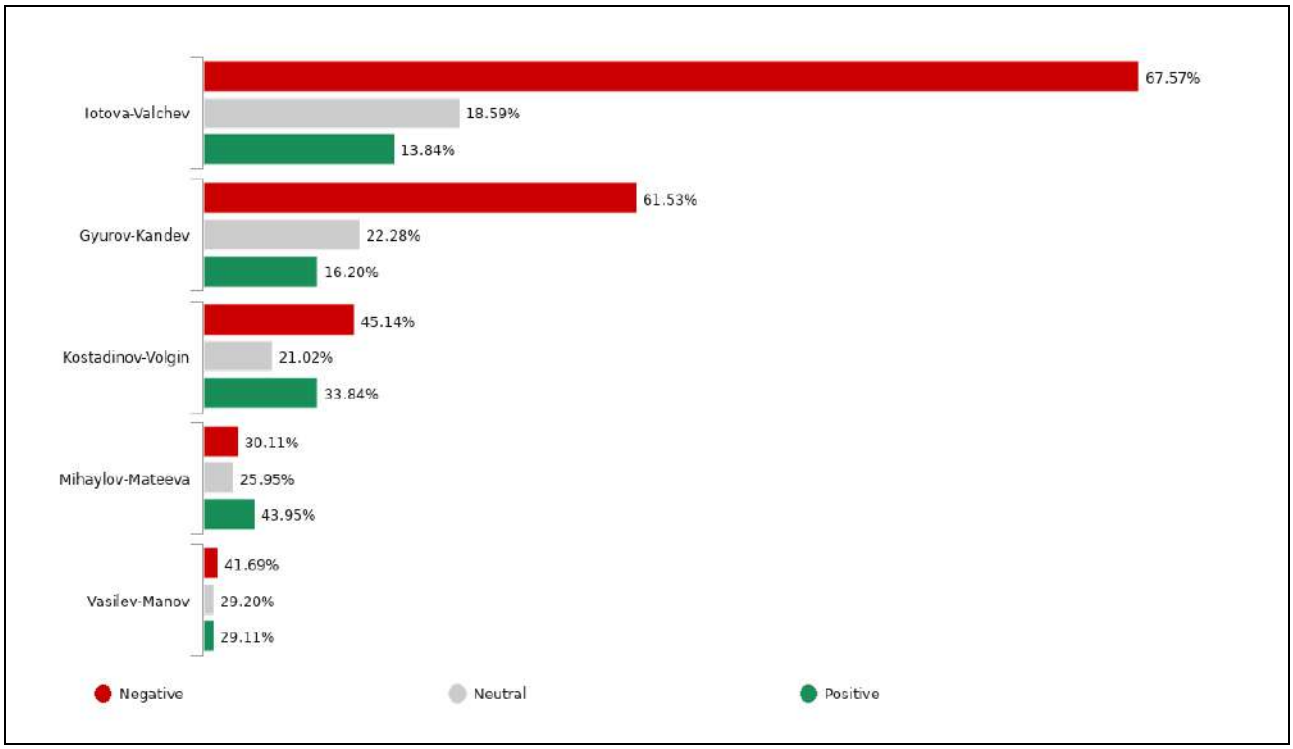
Connections were examined at the account, post, and network levels. The findings are based on multiple indicators occurring together. The detailed methodology, breakdown of data by platform, and relevant limitations are provided in the appendix.

4 Overall Landscape

Iotova and Valchev account for more than half of the monitored mentions of presidential candidates (53%), followed by Gyurov and Kandev (27%) and Kostadinov and Volgin (13%). The remaining three tickets account for approximately 7% combined.

The highest shares of posts with negative sentiment were recorded for content mentioning Iotova's ticket (68%) and Gyurov's ticket (61%). For Kostadinov's ticket, 45% of posts had negative sentiment, while 33% had positive sentiment. For Mihaylov's ticket, the positive sentiment outweighed the negative sentiment, at 45% versus 29%. The automated assessment reflects the emotional sentiment of the entire text, not necessarily the attitude toward the candidates. For example, a

post with negative sentiment may describe an event or criticize one of the opposing candidates rather than the ticket being mentioned.



4.1 Trends and Posting Activity

Before the official campaign began and during its first few days, the monitored content mentioning the presidential tickets averaged approximately 1,100 posts per day. Around the drone attacks on October 6 and 13, 2026, this volume increased to approximately 1,500 posts per day before declining to around 1,000 during the final week of the monitoring period (October 14–21, 2026).

The peaks in activity correspond to specific events:

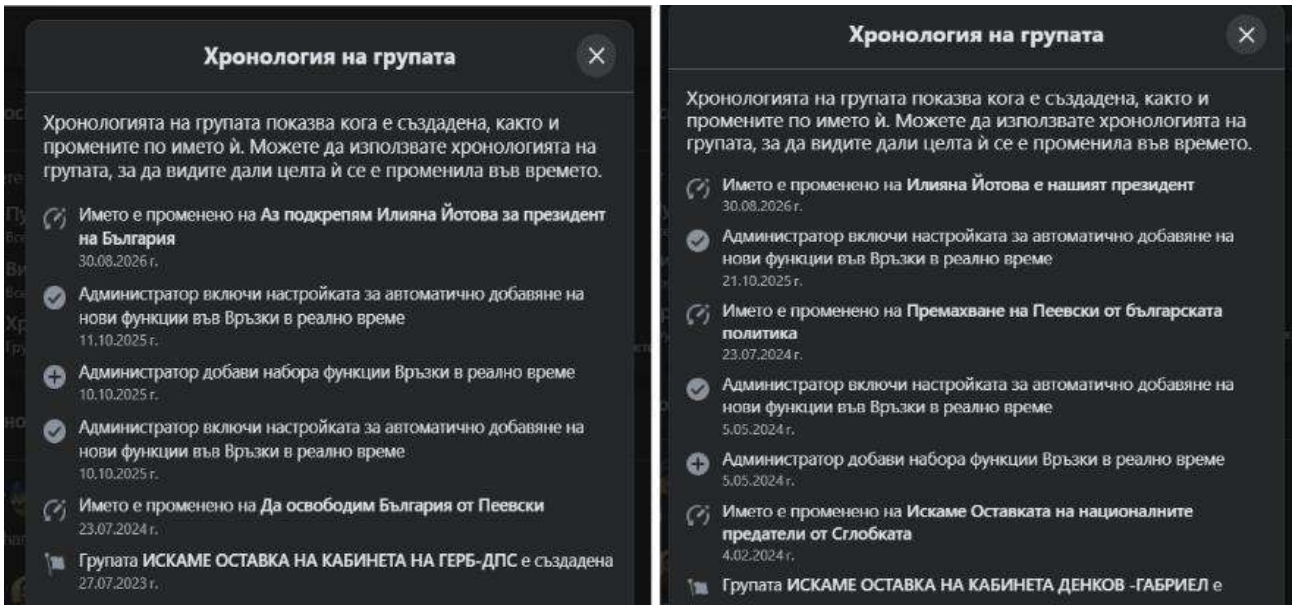
- **September 1**: Gyurov and Kandev announce their candidacy. This is the day with the highest number of posts mentioning Gyurov (1,215).
- **September 11–14**: The pardon scandal drives a peak in activity. Iotova is mentioned in as many as 1,422 posts per day, while the total number of posts mentioning all presidential tickets reaches 2,286 on September 11. Three out of four posts mentioning Iotova during these four days have negative sentiment (75%).
- **September 22–23**: The dispute over the restoration of the Shipka monument marks Kostadinov's peak in coverage, with 786 posts, approximately eight times his September average.
- **October 5–6**: The pardon controversy resurfaces, followed by the Black Sea attack on October 6. Iotova is mentioned in 1,343 posts, 73% of which have negative sentiment.
- **October 12–14**: Iotova's television interview, further attacks on ships, and the first extraordinary parliamentary session concerning the pardon generate more than 1,300 posts.
- **October 20–21**: A protest against Radev and Iotova, another pardon involving a person convicted of drug offenses and linked to Iotova, and the failure to secure a quorum for the

second parliamentary session on the pardons coincide with increased activity across all presidential tickets. This period includes the highest daily post counts for Mihaylov (193) and Vasilev (58). The share of posts mentioning Iotova with negative sentiment returns to the level recorded during the week of the pardon scandal (75%).

5 Mechanisms

5.1 Repurposed Audiences

The most common tactic on Facebook is repurposing existing groups originally created for unrelated topics. During the campaign, these groups are renamed to support specific candidates, giving them access to established audiences without revealing who actually manages the groups. The largest such network (approximately 320,000 members) is administered by an account bearing the name of Nikolay Barekov and accounts using variations of the name "Yordan Bonev." Most of the content shared across the network comes from the BNews website. The network dates back to 2022, when it began with an anti-euro group (139,000 members). It also includes groups opposing the Denkov government, the political arrangement known as "Сглобката" (Sglobkata), and the political figures Peevski and Borisov.



Two of the groups supporting the Radev government were created in 2023 and renamed on the same day, August 30, 2026, to "Илияна Йотова е нашият президент" (Iliana Iotova Is Our President; 55,000 members) and "Аз подкрепям Илияна Йотова за президент" (I Support Iliana Iotova for President; 52,000 members). The network also includes a group opposing Gyurov.

Network	Members	Who Benefits
Barekov / BNews / Bonev	~320,000	Supports Iotova; opposes Gyurov and Borisov
“Bulgaria and Russia, Eternal Friendship” (dstandart.com)	~179,000	Supports Kostadinov; pro-Russian orientation
Commercial portfolio “Групи Бг Страници” (BG Groups and Pages)	~58,000	Supports Progressive Bulgaria (PB) and Iotova
“МОЯТ ИЗБОР” (My Choice)	~23,000	Supports Gyurov and Kandev
Deleva / “P.B.” profiles	~5,000	Supports Gyurov; opposes Iotova

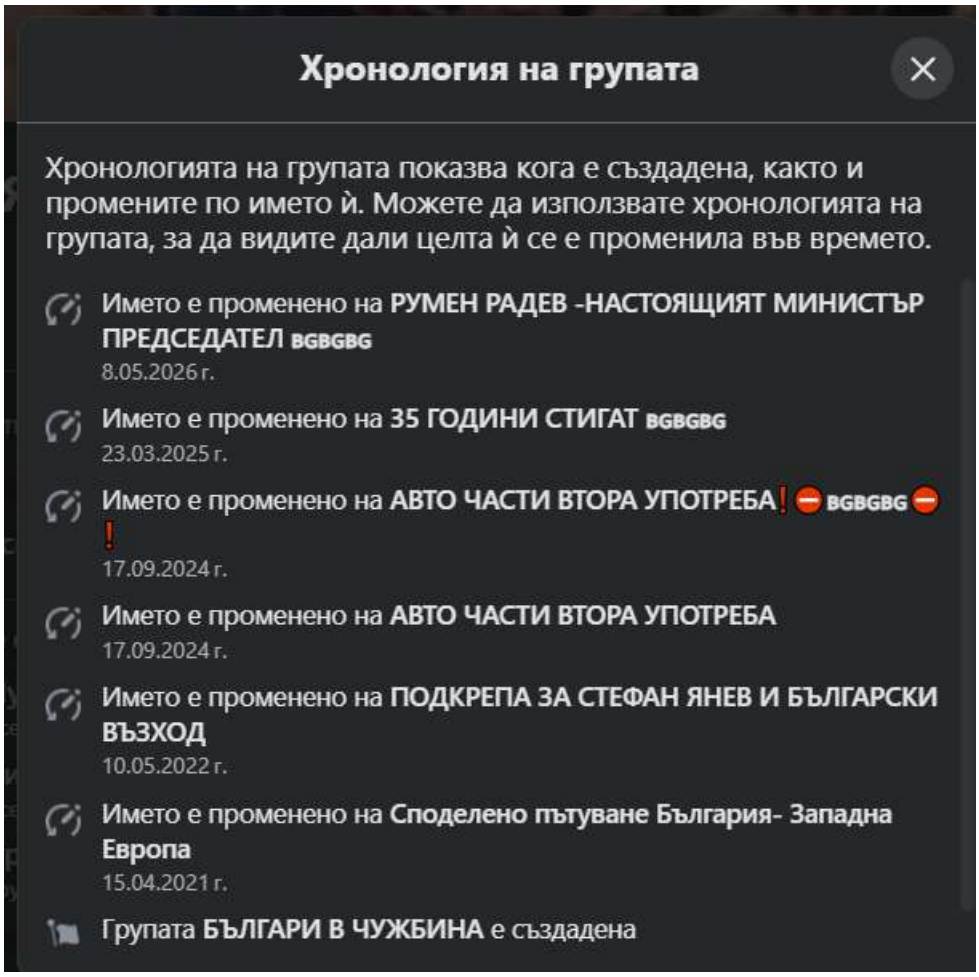
Membership may overlap across individual groups. The groups were identified using a consistent search approach covering the names of all candidates and parties. The networks were established by examining group administrators and the other groups they manage. The largest number of networks was found around Progressive Bulgaria (PB) and Iotova, leading to a more detailed mapping of this political camp. The networks associated with them include approximately 85 groups, compared with around 20 for each of the other political camps.

In the groups examined manually, the most active contributors are the network operators, administrators, and moderators themselves. In the Barekov, BNews, and Bonev network, administrators publish two-thirds of all posts. The BNews Bg account published 749 posts across 5 groups, while the “Премиера Радев” (Prime Minister Radev) account published 515 posts across four groups and generated the most engagements (62,600). The “Николай Бареков” (Nikolay Barekov) account published 273 posts in 2 groups, while two accounts using different spellings of Yordan Bonev’s name published a combined 152 posts, generating 21,300 engagements. “Таралеж БГ” (Taralezh BG) published 342 posts across 5 groups. Kolev Bo, which shares links to dstandart.com, published 271 posts and generated 49,500 engagements. Snezhana Kraleva, who has administered the group “ИЛИЯНА ЙОТОВА – ПРЕЗИДЕНТЪТ НА БЪЛГАРИЯ” (Iliana Iotova, President of Bulgaria), formerly “Аз избирам Румен Радев!” (I Choose Rumen Radev!), since its creation, published 103 posts across 3 groups.

The network “България и Русия – вечна дружба” (Bulgaria and Russia, Eternal Friendship), named after its main page, includes groups such as “Подкрепа за Путин срещу САЩ” (Support for Putin Against the USA; 64,000 members) and “Аз подкрепям Путин и Русия!” (I Support Putin and Russia!; 56,000 members). In these groups, the same account posts exclusively links to dstandart.com, a doppelgänger website imitating the newspaper Standart.

The same tactic appears in other networks. The group “РУМЕН РАДЕВ -НАСТОЯЩИЯТ МИНИСТЪР ПРЕДСЕДАТЕЛ” (Rumen Radev, the Current Prime Minister), with 48,000 members,

was created in 2020 as “БЪЛГАРИ В ЧУЖБИНА” (Bulgarians Abroad). Over time, it has served as a group for travel, for Stefan Yanev, and for auto parts.



The account “Групи Бг Страници” (Grupi BG Stranitsi), which manages groups supporting PB and Iotova, advertises “tourist groups with 800,000 members.” This indicates that the groups are also used for commercial purposes.

Groups in the large networks benefiting Iotova have approximately 166,000 members. What makes their management inauthentic is that groups created for entirely different purposes are redirected toward supporting a candidate without disclosing who is behind them. This meets the definition of coordinated inauthentic behavior used in the report. No official connection between these networks and the candidates’ campaigns has been established.

The scale is considerably smaller in the We Continue the Change and Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB) camp. The Facebook account “МОЯТ ИЗБОР” (My Choice) administers five groups supporting Gyurov and Kandev. Another 14 administrators jointly manage one group supporting Gyurov and two groups opposing Iotova.

Velichie and Vazrazhdane openly manage their groups through their official party pages. This constitutes party coordination.

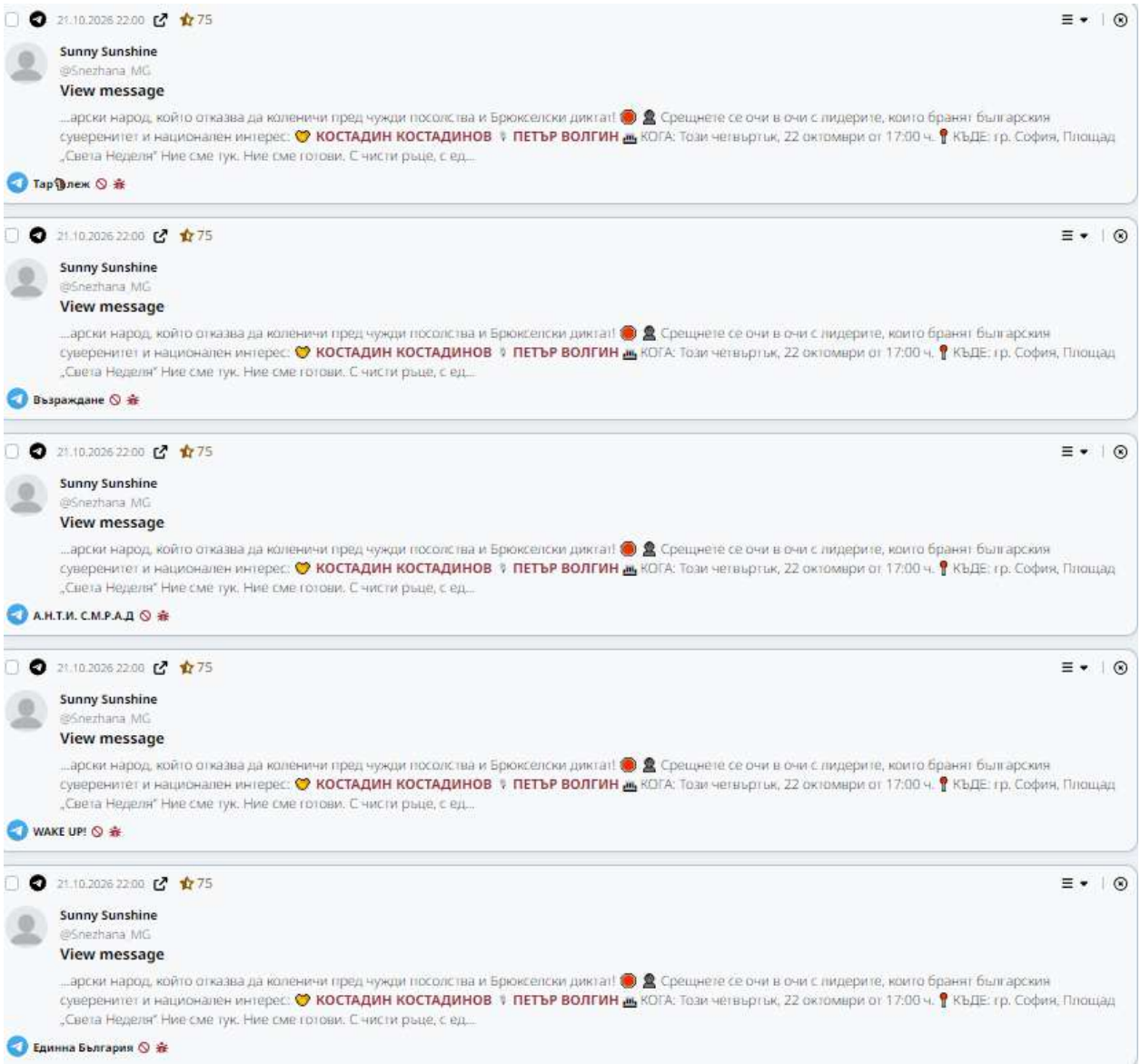
5.2 Synchronized and Automated Posting

Sovereigntist networks do not rely on renamed groups. Instead, a small number of accounts distribute identical messages across multiple channels within seconds, likely using automated tools. Their main platform is Telegram.

Telegram

The core network associated with Vazrazhdane. Eight groups associated with Vazrazhdane account for approximately one-quarter of election-related posts on Telegram. Identical posts appear across these groups almost simultaneously, sometimes in five or six groups within the same second. This speed is likely achieved through automation.

Much of this activity comes from the Sunny Sunshine account, the most active contributor in the monitored Telegram sample, with 1,275 posts as of October 21, 2026. The account posts in six groups and channels within the network, and 96% of its posts consist of identical texts published in multiple locations. In 187 cases, the same text appeared in five or six groups and channels within the same second.



The account's activity doubled between late August and October, with its busiest hour at 3:00 a.m. Bulgarian time. It forwards posts by Kostadinov and Vazrazhdane officials, as well as by journalists and commentators, including Nikolay Barekov and pro-Russian Slovak Member of the European Parliament Ľuboš Blaha. Most of the texts do not identify an author.

The network also distributes repeated texts about Kostadinov's political opponents. When identical texts mentioning Gyurov appear across several Telegram channels, Vazrazhdane's groups account

for their distribution in two out of three cases. They are also responsible for more than half of the repeated texts mentioning Iotova. A manual review of a sample of the texts about Gyurov found no positive examples. Most either attack him or portray him alongside Iotova as part of the "status quo."

This pattern continued during the final week of monitoring. On October 20, Kostadinov's video about support from Alternative for Germany, which included the appeal "Share this video in as many places as possible," appeared simultaneously in five locations across the network. On the same day, at 1:25 a.m., a text about another pardon, titled "After the 'Petrich Escobar,' Another Drug Dealer Pardoned by Iotova," appeared in six groups and channels within four seconds. One of them was "Чистокръвните" (The Purebloods).

However, high posting volumes do not necessarily translate into broad reach. The monitored groups and channels are small, with audiences ranging from 400 to 1,700 people. Most posts with recorded view counts have only one or two views.

Russian and pro-Russian channels. A separate network of pro-Russian channels publishes snippets of content within seconds, and mentions the Dimov and Shivikov presidential ticket more frequently than Kostadinov (141 versus 117 records). Some of these channels are linked to Russian networks:

- **"България ZOV" (Bulgaria ZOV):** Three out of five messages redirect to the Bulgarian edition of News Front, a media outlet sanctioned by the United States in 2021. News Front's Bulgarian-language Telegram channel is blocked in Bulgaria, but its website presents Bulgaria ZOV as its own channel. Articles end with the message "Join our Telegram channel" and provide a link to it.
- **"Дружба FM" (Druzhba FM):** The Bulgarian branch of Sergey Filbert's channel, which the German television program Monitor (ARD) describes as part of a network of pro-Russian channels.
- **InfodefBULGARIA**: The Bulgarian branch of the InfoDefense network, documented by DFRLab.
- **"PRAVDA BG":** The Bulgarian channel of the Pravda network. It reposts content from other channels in the cluster after an average delay of 25 minutes, focusing primarily on Ukraine, NATO, and Iotova.
- **AsyaZuan_Bulgaria**: Asya Zuan's channel. Articles published in the Bulgarian edition of News Front are signed "A.Z," and accompanied by a link to her VKontakte profile.

A manual review identified 48 cases in which identical texts appeared in Telegram groups and channels belonging to both monitored networks: the network around Vazrazhdane and the one associated with Russian networks. In 28 of these cases, the text appeared first in the Vazrazhdane network, while in 14 cases it appeared first in the Bulgarian-language network linked to Russian sources. The posting sequence could not be established in the remaining 6 cases.

Facebook

Distribution in open political groups. Many political groups allow any member to publish content. This enables messages to spread beyond groups directly associated with a particular candidate or party.

On October 8, 2026, Kostadinov's comments following the Consultative Council on National Security meeting were shared across 11 groups with different political orientations within a minute and a half. The short interval suggests that the posts may have come from the same distributor.

TikTok

MECH. In addition to Radostin Vasilev's personal account, MECH's campaign content is distributed through nakata_bg07 (124,000 followers) and the fan account radostinvasilevprezident (42,600 followers). The two accounts follow similar posting patterns and share each other's content, sometimes only a minute apart.

Together, the three accounts generated approximately 5 million views, more than any other political camp on TikTok. With 107 videos, nakata_bg07 is among the most active accounts in the monitored sample, having published three times as many videos as Vasilev's personal account. Its most-viewed video, published on September 3, 2026, reached 527,900 views, surpassing every video published by Vasilev himself.

Vazrazhdane. Two accounts sharing Vazrazhdane's content, bulgarianpolitics (approximately 32,000 followers) and mladezhizavazrazhdane (approximately 5,900 followers), use the same combination of hashtags in which some Cyrillic letters are replaced with visually similar Latin characters. For example, in the hashtag #Възраждане, the final letter is actually a Latin "e." These variants are examined in more detail in Section 5.4.

Videos from these accounts are also reposted by bgsuverenninovini, an account created on September 12, 2026, and linked to the website bsnnovini.online. It posts mainly at night and retains the mixed-script hashtags. One of its posts, "ПОСЛЕДНО ПРЕДУПРЕЖДЕНИЕ КЪМ УКРАЙНА" (Final Warning to Ukraine), received approximately 294,000 views.

5.3 Anonymous "Media Outlets" and "Civic Movements"

The strongest indications of coordination on TikTok involve accounts that present themselves as independent media outlets or civic movements without disclosing who is behind them. Some follow the government's agenda, while others attack it.

Four pro-government "media outlets." The accounts bg_politics ("Independent Platform for Political News," 91,000 followers), izbiram_bulgaria (29,000), budna_bulgaria (23,000), and tribunata_bg (19,000) present themselves as separate news pages but follow a shared posting schedule and repost nearly all of one another's content.

For 12 of the 20 analyzed videos from bg_politics, izbiram_bulgaria posted a video on the same topic within the following 30 minutes. In some cases, all four accounts used identical text.

Their content follows Radev's agenda, including reforms to the security services and the ban on gambling advertising. The accounts also publish attacks on his political opponents related to the Petrohan case and the mayor of Varna.

Anti-government accounts: "Съпротивата" (The Resistance), "Отпорът" (The Pushback), and "Патриот БГ" (Patriot BG). The accounts suprotivata_bg (46,000 followers), otporut_bg (8,000; created on July 19, 2026), and bg.patriot (4,500; created on January 12, 2026) present themselves as a civic "resistance" movement.

Between August 20 and October 21, 2026, the three accounts posted a total of 544 videos, representing 16% of all videos in the monitored TikTok sample. Combined, they published more

videos than any individual media outlet, party, or candidate in the sample. Four of suprotivata_bg's videos ranked among the 50 most viewed. Their view counts ranged from 351,000 to 513,000.

The three accounts frequently publish content on the same topics, in the same sequence, and repost one another's videos. Their main targets are Radev, Progressive Bulgaria, and the government. This activity benefits Gyurov, but no direct connection to his official campaign has been established.

5.4 Hashtags Combining Latin and Cyrillic Characters

How It Appears	Latin Characters Used	Actual Spelling
#костадинкостадинов	c, a	#костадинкостадинов
#Възраждане	e	#Възраждане
#хората	a	#хората
#новина	a	#новина
#асенвасилев	a, c	#асенвасилев
#борисов	c	#борисов

How the hashtags are used. The official account vazrazhdane.bg has used #Възраждане since June 3, 2026. Two other accounts sharing Vazrazhdane's content, bulgarianpolitics (32,000 followers) and mladezhizavazrazhdane (5,900), began using mixed-script hashtags at almost the same time. On July 22–23, bulgarianpolitics also used these variants for political opponents: #асенвасилев and #борисов.

Both accounts post almost exclusively videos without accompanying descriptions. They use the same set of hashtags in the same order, suggesting a shared posting template.

Search and monitoring. Repeated manual searches on TikTok returned consistent results when the spelling stayed the same. Replacing the Cyrillic "e" with the Latin "e," however, changed the results. The two spellings did not return identical result sets.

Mixed-script spelling may also make it more difficult for external monitoring tools that search for exact matches to standard Cyrillic hashtags. The mixed-script variants identified in this study were included in the searches. The observations do not establish whether the purpose of using these variants was to hinder any potential monitoring.

Views and engagement. Of the 45 videos posted by Vazrazhdane's official account and included in the analysis, 11 used #Възраждане. These videos accounted for 805,000 of the 1.16 million total views across all 45 videos, or approximately 69%.

In the analyzed samples, the engagement ratio was 7.4% for mladezhizavazrazhdane and 8.9% for bulgarianpolitics. The two accounts also had more shares relative to likes: 16% and 37%, respectively, compared with 5–11% for the examined accounts associated with MECH (5.2).

The higher share-to-like ratios are more consistent with mobilized supporters actively distributing content than with artificial amplification, as in the case of MECH (5.2).

Two of the ten most-viewed election-related videos in the monitored TikTok sample were published by Vazrazhdane's official account (672,200 views; September 10, 2026) and by mladezhizavazrazhdane (518,100 views; September 27, 2026). These results do not establish whether the mixed-script hashtags contributed to the videos' view counts.

5.5 Duplicated Comments

The sample used to analyze duplicated (repeated) Facebook comments covered 41,529 comments under posts by media outlets, candidates, and political parties, published between August 25 and October 9, 2026. Of these, 3,128 comments (7.5%) were repetitions of 472 distinct texts.

Following the October 6 drone attack, duplicated comments appeared from both geopolitical camps:

- **Pro-Western and anti-government**: "Black Sea **!**Article 5**?** ..." appeared 26 times across 7 pages; "...Radev and Iotova are Russian lackeys..." appeared 14 times across 4 pages.
- **Pro-Russian**: "THEN DECLARE WAR ON RUSSIA..." appeared 6 times across 5 pages within 20 minutes; "The attacks on the ships... were started by Ukraine!!" appeared 6 times across 3 pages.

The duplicated comments increased the pro-Russian share of comments on the issue more than the pro-Western share, with 61 pro-Russian comments compared with 34 pro-Western comments.

This tactic creates the impression of widely shared public opinion under media posts that attract the greatest interest and reach large audiences.

5.6 Imported Narratives

Rybar („Рыбарь")

Rybar is a Russian network of Telegram channels. Its founder, Mikhail Zvinchuk, has been sanctioned by the United Kingdom, while the United States is offering a reward of up to USD 10 million for information about the network's interference in U.S. elections. On October 9, 2026, during Bulgaria's election campaign, Montenegro detained Zvinchuk and four other members of his team and expelled them on national security grounds.

Between September 6 and October 3, 2026, the regional channel Balkanar (Балканарь), with 13,500 followers, published a series of four posts about Bulgaria's elections, each receiving between 800 and 5,400 views. On October 3, the main Rybar channel (1.55 million followers) published "Болгарские расклады" (Bulgarian Political Scenarios) four hours after Balkanar. The post received 101,000 views, equivalent to approximately half the combined views of all Bulgarian channels in the monitored sample during the same period.

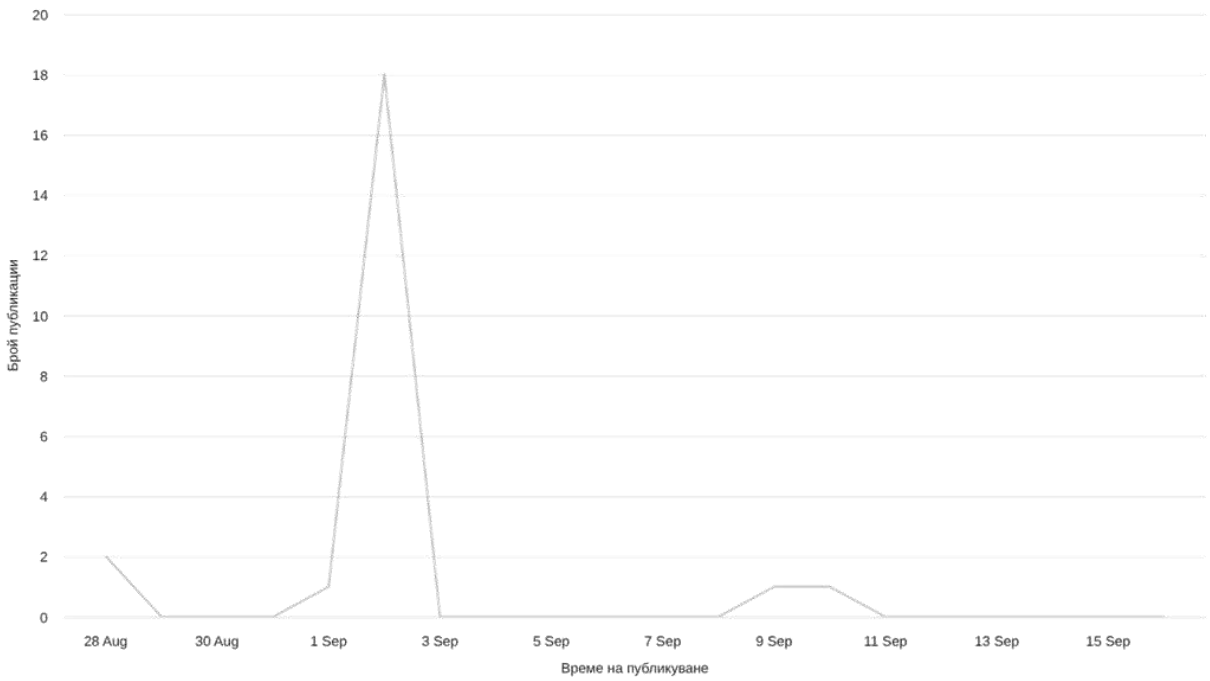
The Russian propaganda channel's message is that Radev has "stabilized" the country, Iotova represents a continuation of his leadership and is the "undisputed favorite," while Vazrazhdane is a "radically pro-Russian movement."

A post published on September 6, 2026, also advised Vazrazhdane to nominate Volgin instead of Kostadinov to attract a broader protest vote. The party did not follow this advice, and Volgin is running for vice president.

Voting Machines: Coordinated Campaign and Calls for a Boycott

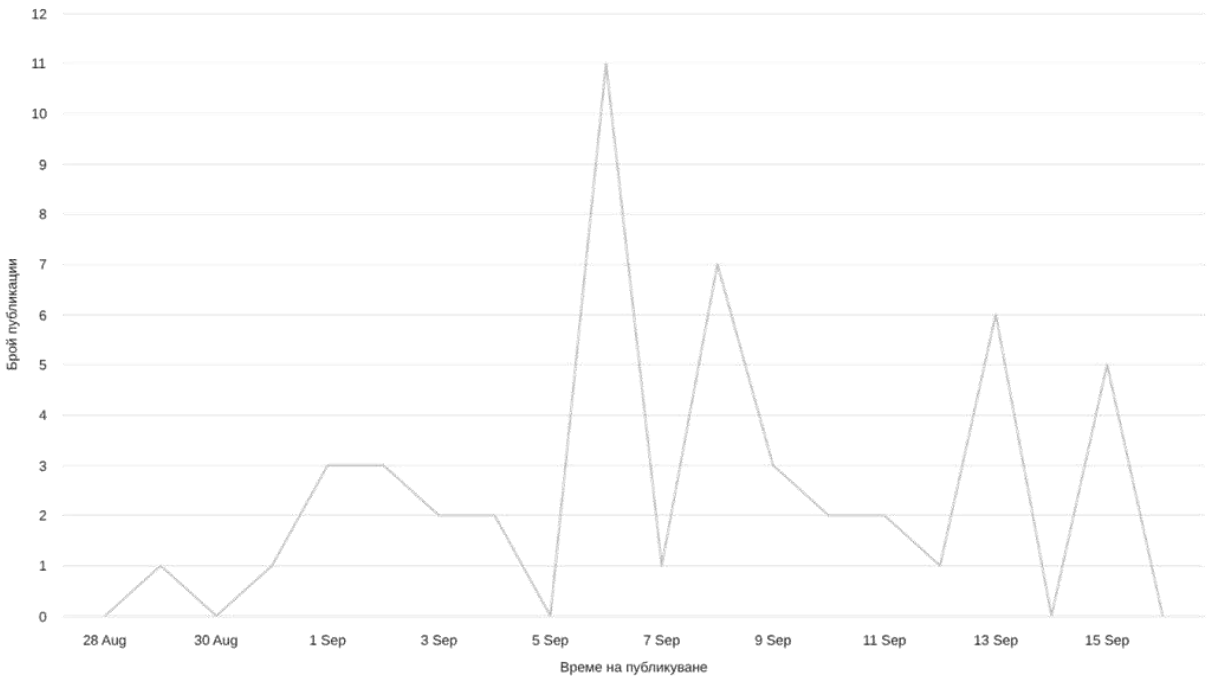
Between August 28 and October 16, 2026, a total of 149 comments were identified under posts published by the Facebook pages of 22 national media outlets. The comments attempted to spread a narrative about the existence of a "global election cartel." The campaign sought to promote the claim that the United States funds a network involved in election fraud across more than 100 countries, that the Association of World Election Bodies (A-WEB), of which Bulgaria's Central Election Commission is a member, is part of this network, and that the Smartmatic voting machines have been compromised.

The campaign unfolded in waves using the same method. Long, identical texts were posted under content published by several media outlets within minutes of one another. The largest wave occurred on September 25, 2026, when 5 texts appeared under 23 posts from 14 media outlets between 8:24 a.m. and 12:46 p.m. The texts appeared under posts from a separate media outlet every 3 to 4 minutes. On October 2, 2026, a series of posts about Smartmatic was immediately followed by comments stating, "IN BULGARIA, THE VOTING MACHINES ARE SMARTMATIC MACHINES." This connected the narrative directly to machine voting in Bulgaria. The waves continued in the final weeks of the campaign, appearing under posts from 8 media outlets on October 14 and under posts from 3 on October 16. At least one series was published by a single account that otherwise shares machine-translated texts from the American political right. Most of these comments have since been removed from Facebook, but many remain available in Sensika.



Beyond the comments about A-WEB and Smartmatic, a broader narrative is circulating in the monitored content: that machine voting makes it possible to manipulate elections. The machines are referred to as "мадуровки" (madurovki), a derogatory nickname, and distrust of them appears both in comments and in standalone posts from media outlets, political pages, and personal accounts. For example, on October 16, 2026, the Facebook page of BLITZ published a post titled

"Presidential Election Theft Looms with 'Madurovki' Voting Machines." A September 13, 2026, post by "GERB – Pazardzhik" quoted Borisov, who expressed distrust of voting machines and predicted lower voter turnout.



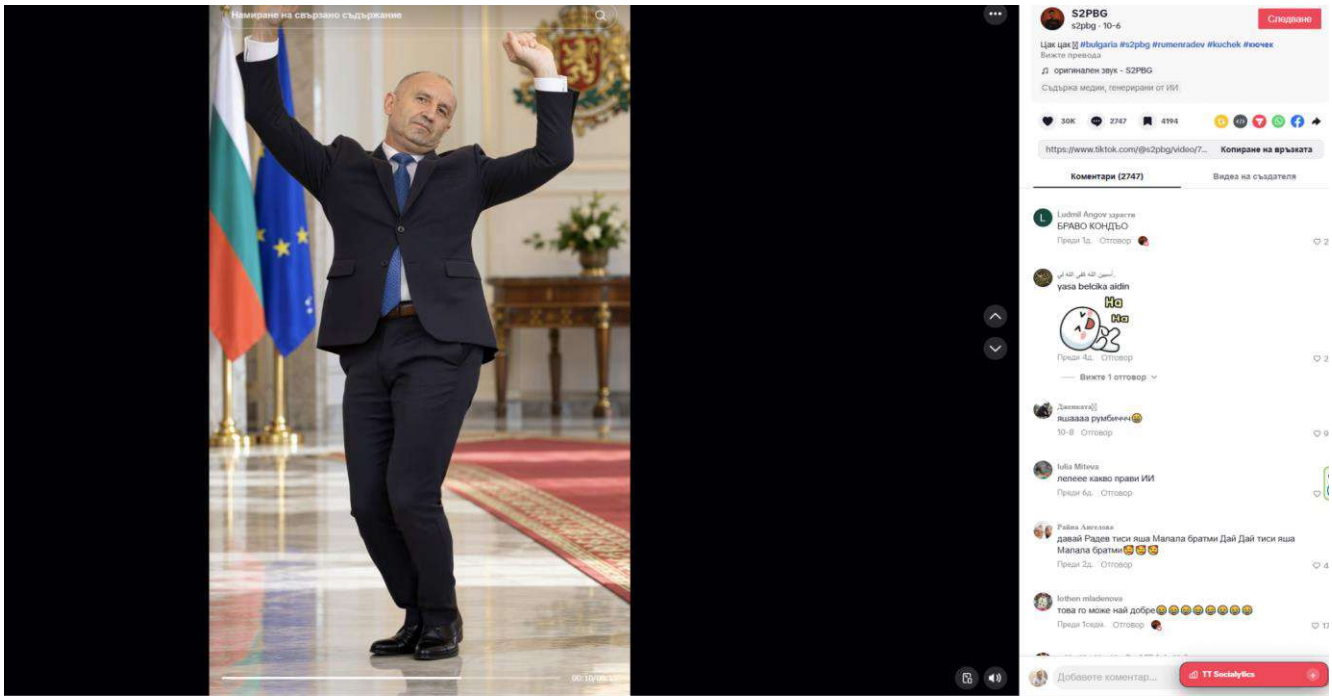
In the comments, the voting machines are frequently associated with the claim that the election outcome has already been decided in favor of Radev and Iotova. Some texts present abstaining from voting as a refusal to legitimize alleged fraud. These include both personal statements, such as "For the first time since democracy began, I'm not going to vote. I want nothing to do with Madurovki," and direct calls to action, such as "Boycott elections using Madurovki!" Some commenters explicitly identify themselves as GERB voters, but the available data does not allow their political affiliation to be verified.

5.7 AI-Generated Content

Politicians dancing kyuchek. The AI-generated content shared during the campaign is primarily satirical and parodic. It has gained the most traction on TikTok.

s2pbg. The account (4,800 followers) describes itself as "AI • Music/Video • Parody." Its videos feature AI-generated politicians dancing kyuchek or singing.

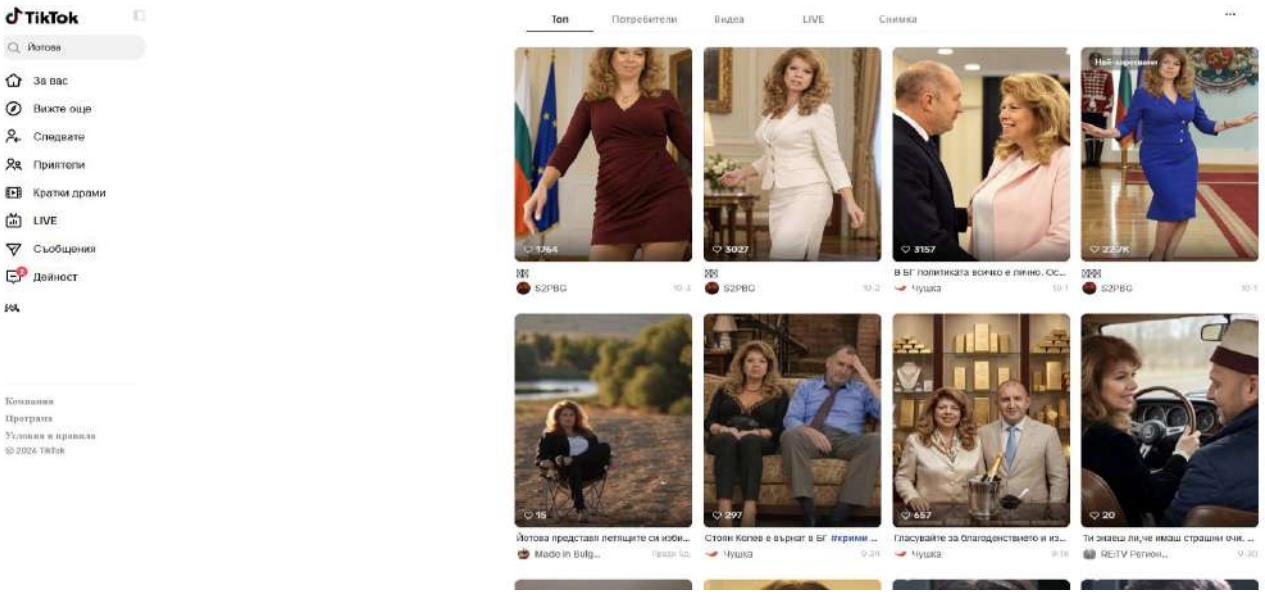
- **Sudden** surge in activity. The account has existed since 2023. Until September 2026, it published approximately one video per month, averaging around 5,000 views. Between October 1 and October 13, 2026, it shared videos that generated 3.5 million views. The most-viewed video features Radev ("Цак цак," or "Tsak Tsak"; October 6, 2026) and reached 1 million views, which made it the most popular election-related video on TikTok during the entire monitoring period. Four other videos from the account ranked among the 50 most viewed.
- **Targets**. The main targets are current and former government figures: Radev (6 videos; 1.6 million views), Borisov (5 videos; 900,000 views), Iotova (3 videos; 700,000 views), Peevski (5 videos), and Kiril Petkov (2 videos). Gyurov, Kostadinov, Vasilev, and Mihaylov do not appear.



4ushka. The account "Чушка" (Chushka), with 17,800 followers, describes its content as "spicy political scandals, intrigue, gossip, and gaffes." Since late September, it has published AI-generated satire targeting Radev and Iotova, portraying them as a couple under the hashtag #йотоварадев. One example is "Боса на Прогресивна Чалгария поздравява феновете" (The Boss of Progressive Chalgaria Greets the Fans), published on September 25, 2026, which received 365,000 views. Of the 25 videos published by the account since August 25, 2026, 15 focus specifically on Radev and Iotova. These videos generated 750,000 of the account's total 800,000 views.

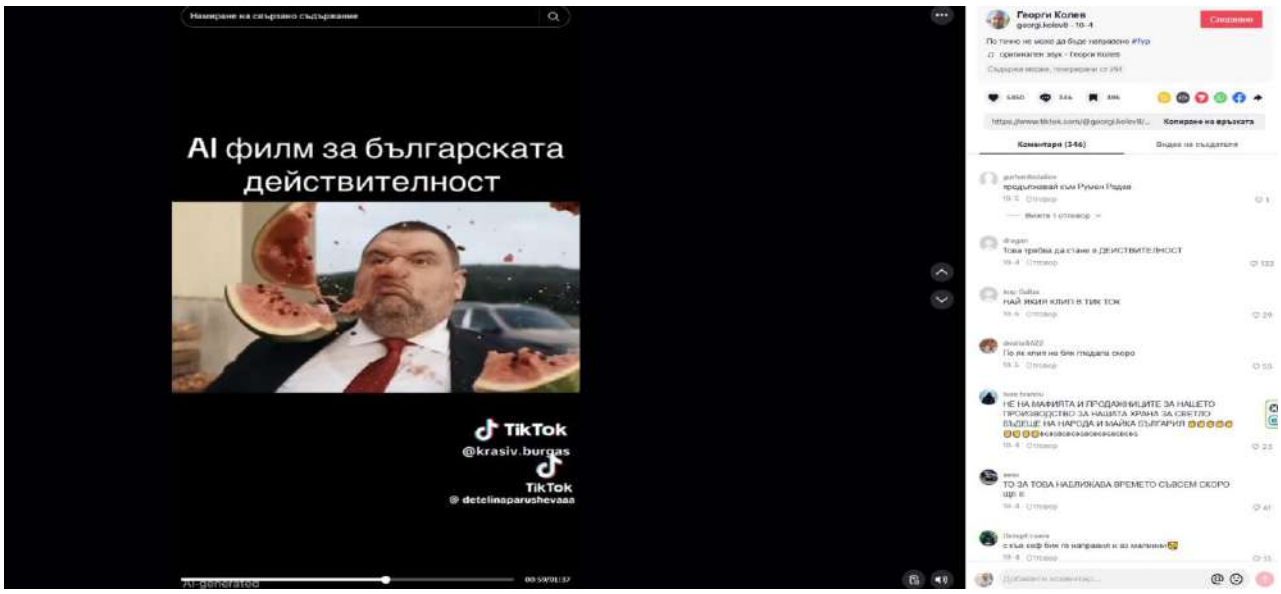


Visibility. Videos featuring politicians dancing kyuchek appear among the top results when searching for Iotova on TikTok. Other accounts publish similar content, and the videos are also reposted by additional accounts. TikTok's AI-generated content label is barely visible. Many of these accounts also operate YouTube channels.

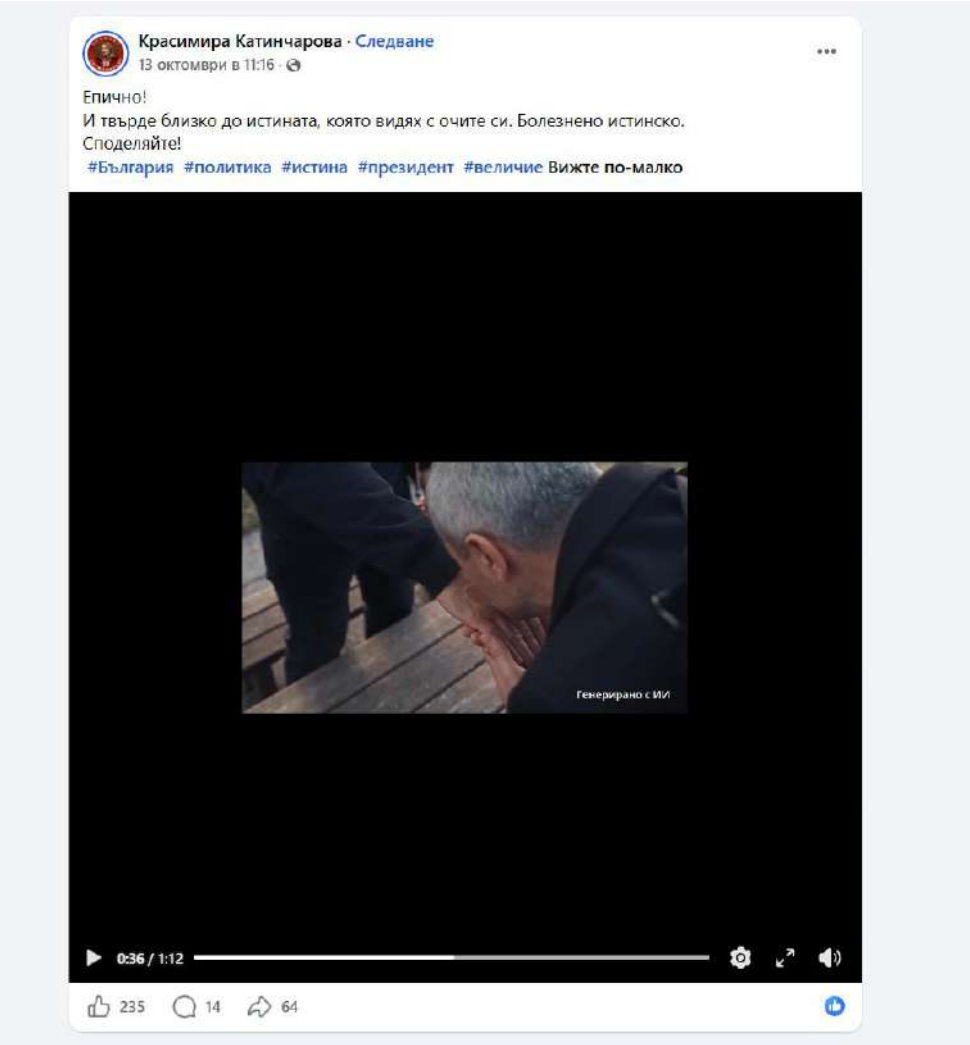


Political Parties Also Use AI

On TikTok, Velichie's official account published an "AI film about Bulgarian reality" (45,000 views).



The "film" has been widely shared. On Facebook, politicians from Velichie have distributed an AI-generated video mocking Kostadinov as "fake opposition."



6 Case Study: The Black Sea Attack

Following the drone attack on ships on October 6, 2026, posting activity increased by approximately 20% but did not reach the peaks recorded in September. Posts claiming that Radev and Iotova had remained silent generated the most engagements. The allegation that Ukraine carried out the attack as a “false-flag operation” remained on the fringes of the discussion, even though Telegram channels spread it quickly.

Vazrazhdane’s core network responded that same day. The message “Bulgaria must stop arms deliveries to Ukraine” appeared in 14 Telegram channels on October 6, 2026. A video featuring Kostadinov, titled “Zelenskyy is lying! Radev is a hypocrite!”, appeared in 7 channels within the same minute on October 7, 2026. Channels linked to Russian networks shared a video by Reserve General Shivikov, titled “Strange Circumstances Surrounding the Attacked Ships. A False-Flag Operation?”, across 8 channels within two minutes on October 7, 2026. Shivikov is Georgi Dimov’s vice-presidential running mate, which means that these channels were distributing messages connected to a single presidential ticket.

The claim that “a report by the State Agency for National Security to the Consultative Council on National Security” stated that Ukraine had attacked the ships in a “false-flag operation” originated from a post by a private Facebook account. On October 8, 2026, the claim appeared in comments

on 6 media pages within two hours. On October 11 and 13, 2026, it was picked up by Vazrazhdane's core network on Telegram.

7 What Has Changed Since the Parliamentary Elections

The networks previously used for election campaigning have become less active, while new accounts have taken over their roles. It is unclear whether this shift is due to the publicity surrounding the findings of Tracker #2, actions taken by the platforms, or a change in strategy.

The gap in Iotova's TikTok presence. Iotova has almost no content of her own on TikTok. The account that appears to have been managed by her team ("Илияна Йотова"; 2,600 followers) published campaign videos until September 28, 2026, but was no longer accessible as of October 13, 2026. It is unclear whether the owner deleted the account or the platform blocked it. Two other accounts that previously used her name have been renamed. The only official campaign presence identified during the analysis was the initiative committee's account, which has 361 followers. A TikTok search for Iotova's name returned approximately 180 videos, more than 100 of which were negative toward her, while only 12 were positive. The negative videos generated approximately 13 times more views. The sentiment was assessed using a language model and verified manually.

Progressive Bulgaria on TikTok. Tracker #2 documented a network benefiting Progressive Bulgaria, consisting of the official account @progresivna.bg and associated unofficial accounts using the Russian hashtag #рекомендации. Six months later, the network is operating at a much lower level of activity. The official account published 19 videos between August 25 and October 9, 2026, compared with 102 in March and April. Its views dropped from 18.9 million to 1.9 million. The last video using #рекомендации was published on April 20, 2026, the day after the elections. The associated unofficial account @onlytruth.bulgari no longer exists.

Progressive Bulgaria on Facebook. Some of the groups renamed to support Radev before the parliamentary elections now bear Iotova's name (5.1).

Velichie on TikTok. In the previous trackers (#1 and #2), produced by Sensika and BFMI, Velichie was among the most active political parties on TikTok. Since August 25, 2026, its official account, ppvelichie (49,000 followers), has published just 13 videos, generating 228,000 views. Reposting activity from its main satellite account stopped in March 2026. Coordination associated with the party has shifted to Facebook.

DPS-New Beginning. The party's accounts that were removed before the parliamentary elections have not been replaced by any visible new accounts.

Vazrazhdane is the exception. The party's network remains active and is growing stronger. The activity of the main contributor to its automated Telegram network has doubled between late August and October (5.2).



8 Regulatory Framework and Recommendations

8.1 One TV Channel, One Network

TV “Справедлива България” (Fair Bulgaria) was registered with the Council for Electronic Media in March 2025. Its owner, Stream TV AD, is a company established in 1997 whose entire board of directors was replaced in December 2022. One member of the new board had been a candidate for the KOI political party in the June 2024 parliamentary elections. KOI, United Social Democracy, and the political movement “Social Democrats” formed the Fair Bulgaria coalition in 2022.

During the current campaign, the channel has contracts with 10 of the 27 presidential tickets, totaling EUR 134,400 in state-funded media packages. Videos featuring the candidates on the channel’s YouTube account rarely receive more than 100 views. Seven of the ten tickets have documented connections either to one another or to the parties in the coalition:

- Nako Stefanov and Plamen Paskov were part of Fair Bulgaria’s civil society quota in 2022.
- The initiative committees of Stefanov and Kamen Taskov were registered just 20 minutes apart at 6 Koloman Street, the headquarters of United Social Democracy.
- In September 2025, Yordan Maldzhanski announced the formation of the “United Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria” alongside Yordan Gergov, chairman of United Social Democracy.
- Metodi Bachvarov’s committee uses the email address of the media outlet Pero.BG, whose manager represents Maldzhanski’s committee.
- Ivo Lulchev is the lawyer of Atanas Stefanov, the vice-presidential running mate of Ventsislav Angelov (the party “The Truth and Nothing but the Truth” or ISI).
- ISI has a contract with the television channel that involves no payment.

Four of the presidential tickets have allocated almost their entire state-funded media package (EUR 20,440) to the channel.

All of this is within the law, but it raises questions about whether the candidacies were coordinated in advance. Initiative committees were registered 20 minutes apart at the same address, email addresses are shared with media outlets from the same circle, and contracts were signed with the same marginal TV channel on YouTube, which received EUR 134,400 in public funding. The Election Code does not require media outlets receiving these funds to have an audience or to be independent of the candidates. Media packages have also been redirected in previous



elections. The Central Election Commission (CEC) and the Bulgarian National Audit Office can investigate whether the funds were used for their intended purpose.

8.2 Platform Rules and Regulatory Gaps

Telegram. Telegram reports fewer than 45 million monthly active users in the European Union, i.e. below the threshold at which the Digital Services Act classifies a platform as a very large online platform, subject to stricter regulatory obligations. There are concerns that the figure may be understated, and the EU is examining how Telegram calculates its user numbers. Bulgarian-language channels linked to Russian networks on the EU sanctions list continue to operate freely. Blocking individual channels does not stop the distribution of their content. News Front's Bulgarian-language channel is blocked in Bulgaria, but its website directs readers to "България ZOV" (Bulgaria ZOV) (5.2). The Bulgarian channel of the Pravda network also remains active.

Different definitions. Coordinated inauthentic behavior has no specific definition in European Union legislation, leaving each platform to define it independently. Meta associates it with fake accounts, while TikTok also includes authentic accounts operating on behalf of undisclosed parties. The same network may violate the rules of one platform while being permitted on another.

Political advertising. Since October 2025, Meta and Google have stopped accepting political advertising in the EU because of Regulation (EU) 2024/900. During this campaign, paid political advertising is virtually absent from official pages. Political content, however, has not disappeared. Instead, it is distributed through unofficial pages, groups, and accounts whose affiliations are unclear. The networks identified in this analysis operate in precisely this space.

AI-generated content. When it comes to labeling AI-generated content, it is important to distinguish between the obligations of those using AI and the obligations of the platforms. Since August 2, 2026, Article 50(4) of the AI Act (Regulation (EU) 2024/1689) requires those using AI systems to create or manipulate "deepfakes" to disclose that the content has been artificially generated or manipulated. The law allows a simpler form of disclosure for works that are clearly satirical or artistic, so that the disclosure does not interfere with how they are presented or experienced.

Separately, the Digital Services Act (Regulation (EU) 2022/2065, Article 35(1)(k)) identifies prominent labeling of generated or manipulated audiovisual content as one of the measures available to very large online platforms to mitigate systemic risks. In the examined videos of dancing politicians (5.7), TikTok's label is barely noticeable. This raises the question of whether the labeling is sufficiently visible and understandable to viewers, without in itself establishing a violation.



8.3 Institutional Response

Institutional response. The Communications Regulation Commission serves as Bulgaria's digital services coordinator. On September 16, 2026, it organized a roundtable on the elections, with BFMI among the participants. The participants agreed that legislative changes were needed. At the time of reporting, there was no information about specific actions taken under the Digital Services Act during the campaign.

Why is exposing these networks not enough? The networks documented in previous trackers (Tracker 1 and Tracker 2) have not disappeared; instead, new accounts have taken over the roles of older ones. Some techniques remain within platform rules, such as mixed-script hashtags and the renaming of groups. Monitoring findings are used in political debate rather than as a basis for action. Without a common definition, the response depends on reports from civil society organizations and the voluntary decisions of individual platforms.

8.4 Recommendations

- Establish a common minimum definition of coordinated inauthentic behavior during election periods, applicable to all major platforms.
- Ensure effective researcher access to the data provided for under the Digital Services Act (Article 40). Only in this way can researchers establish who is behind the networks, rather than merely how they operate.
- Enforce the obligation to label AI-generated content featuring real people, and require transparency regarding unofficial pages, groups, and accounts that distribute political content. Political advertising rules do not cover them.

9 Methodology

9.1 Data

The posts and videos monitored between August 20 and October 21, 2026, are distributed across the platforms as follows:

Platform	Posts and Videos
Facebook	Over 31,000
X	Over 14,000
Telegram	Over 10,900
YouTube	Over 8,700
TikTok	Over 3,000
Instagram	Over 1,700
Total	**Nearly 70,000**

The platforms recorded more than 1 million comments under these posts: over 820,000 on Facebook, 200,000 on TikTok, 37,000 on YouTube, 20,000 on Instagram, 6,800 on X, and 2,700 on Telegram. These figures indicate the scale of the discussions, regardless of whether the comments contain the search terms.

Comments that explicitly matched the search criteria were tracked separately: over 56,000 on Facebook, 5,900 on YouTube, 3,300 on X, and 700 on Telegram. These comments were used to analyze narratives and repeated content. They were not added to the figures above.

9.2 Search and Analysis

The search query includes the names of candidates from all 27 presidential tickets, general election-related terms and hashtags, and spelling variations using Cyrillic, Latin, and mixed-script characters. Terms related to machine voting, Smartmatic, and A-WEB are also included. Radev's name is searched in combination with Iotova's name or with terms related to elections, the presidency, and candidacies. Content needs to match only one of the search criteria or specified combinations to be included. As a result, the monitoring also captures broader political discussions surrounding the candidates.

For the pardon controversy, the Black Sea attack, and the machine voting narrative, the analysis examines available posts and comments within the relevant samples, filtered by keywords.

Potentially duplicated texts are identified by detecting identical content appearing across different accounts. Synchronized posting is examined through publication times and sequences, alongside other connections between sources.

9.3 Targeted Network Mapping

Approximately 480 Facebook sources were mapped, including 174 groups, 168 pages, and 140 administrator profiles. The analysis examined group histories, name changes, and administrators, while also expanding to other sources managed by the same administrators. A network is defined as at least two groups sharing administrators, although this alone does not establish inauthentic behavior.

A total of 45 groups belong to 11 networks. For PB and Iotova, 85 groups were mapped, compared with approximately 20 for each of the other political camps. 50 groups were selected for in-depth analysis, using data on posts, comments, and administrators. The 21 largest groups have approximately 600,000 members. The 16 groups with the largest memberships and highest activity levels were examined in greater detail.

On TikTok, 80 accounts were mapped, and metadata was collected for 31 accounts selected based on their follower counts and activity levels. Search results for candidate-related keywords and hashtags were also analyzed. Comparisons were made based on content, reposts, hashtags, and posting times, with timestamps converted to Bulgarian time.

9.4 Sentiment and Limitations

Sensika's automated sentiment analysis measures the emotional tone of the entire text, not necessarily the attitude toward a particular candidate. For the TikTok sample, the automated assessment was supplemented by analyst review. The most popular videos and those classified as positive were reviewed manually by watching the content, while the remaining videos were assessed based on their descriptions.

The sample does not capture all publicly available election-related content. Videos and images without text matching the defined search criteria may fall outside the scope of the monitoring. TikTok search results depend on the account used and the time of the search. Each sample has its own scope and is not representative of the platform as a whole.

Membership and follower counts may overlap across groups and accounts. Engagement metrics reflect the figures available at the time of data collection. View counts do not represent unique viewers, and engagements do not necessarily indicate support.

Acknowledgments

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Beyond TikTokcracy

Tracking Political Influence on Social Media

BULGARIA'S 2026 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

SENSIKA.COM