Bulgaria: the emergence of opinion leaders 2.0

Description

On Bulgaria’s social networks, dozens of personalities now have a considerable following. They range from intellectuals and showbiz personalities to classic influencers driving new social trends.



As elsewhere in the world, the digitization of Bulgarian civil society has been underway since the 2000s. In particular, it has led to the opening of electronic accounts on social networks, the holders of which are mainly young and working people. Then, in the second half of the 2010s, some of these Internet users, interacting increasingly with their digital environment using messages, images, photos, or videos, became so influential that they acquired the status of opinion leaders among a community of subscribers who came to modify their social, user or consumer behavior. We can attempt to establish the typical profiles of these Bulgarian internet users (or those of Bulgarian origin) who benefit from high visibility and the best digital audiences on the main social networks (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, or TikTok).

Traditional opinion leaders adapt to social networks.

The Bulgarian personalities and professionals who were traditionally the most influential in public opinion before the arrival of modern media have adapted to social networks and learned how to use them to improve their communication with the public. The social actors who have been the first to succeed in making this shift are part of the Bulgarian intelligentsia: politicians, journalists and commentators on political, social, and economic life, intellectuals and sportsmen and women (bearing in mind that sport and its values were frequently used by socialist propaganda in Eastern European countries)(1). Many have successfully transferred their fame and influence from the traditional media to the 2.0 world of social networks. Gradually, they have created a significant community of subscribers, which they have used to communicate. At the time, the Internet was mainly used by the younger generations and working people, so it was these citizens that the intelligentsia first sought to influence via these new tools. In this respect, the dichotomy with the older generation is still quite strong in Bulgaria. Opinion leaders, therefore, reach them through more traditional information channels (television, radio, books, magazines, newspapers, etc.).

However, the volume of subscribers that the opinion leaders of the intelligentsia amass is not necessarily a guarantee of a natural extension of influence, as subscribing to an account only systematically means taking note of all the content broadcast. Above all, not all account holders are very active. The case of tennis player Grigor Dimitrov (1 million subscribers on TikTok) is the most informative, with the sportsman sporadically feeding his account as well as the one he has on Instagram and having virtually abandoned his Facebook page. However, most of the other emblematic figures of this intelligentsia remain active mainly on Facebook, a network frequented by people between 30 and 50. Among the page holders with the most subscribers is Dilma Roussef, who may be of Bulgarian origin through her paternal roots but is, above all, a former President of Brazil and a political figure with an intense following on Facebook (almost 2.9 million subscribers), former international footballer Dimitar Berbatoff (the most successful Bulgarian footballer, 2.25 million followers), tennis player Grigor Dimitrov (760,000), fitness star Valentin Mitev (600,000) and star journalist Martin Kirilov Bogdanov (aka Martin Karbowski, 527,000 followers), Bulgarian President Roumen Radev (370,000), former Prime Minister Boyko Borissov (317,000) and journalist Joro Ignatov (250,000).

The influence of showbiz celebrities on social networks

Many Bulgarians in the music, film, modeling, and entertainment industries who have achieved a certain level of fame use social networks to boost their popularity or retain their fans(2). They are often helped by their artistic agents, who give them sound advice on posting the right messages. The account with the most significant number of followers is undoubtedly that of Bulgarian-Canadian actress and model Nina Dobrev, followed by nearly 8 million Internet users (Facebook, Twitter, TikTok). She rose to international fame, playing one of the lead roles in the TV series Vampire Diaries (2009-2017). German-Turkish singer Tarkan (Tevetoglu) is also well known abroad (with 1.7 million followers on Facebook), but few people know he is also of Bulgarian origin. The best-known Bulgarian singer on Facebook (933,000 followers) is Preslava (Petya Ivanova), a performer of tchalga (pop-folk music). The accounts of singer and TV presenter Slavi Trifonov (almost 650,000 followers), who will become a politician in 2021 (ITN formation), are also prevalent, as are those of pop-folk singers Galena (Galina Gencheva), Sofi Marinova, Desislava (Doneva) and singers such as Azis (Vasil Boyanov) and Krisko (Kristian Radoslavov Talev). The most famous model is Catagay Ulusoy (over 5 million subscribers), a Turk from Bulgaria on his father's side. He has also embarked on a career as an actor, playing notably since 2018 in the Netflix series The Protector of Istanbul. Bulgarian erotic models also have followed accounts, but their fame is more confidential; among the best-known and most followed is Juliana Ghani (13,900 subscribers on TikTok). Finally, some Bulgarian celebrities present on social networks (Alex Petkanova, Bilyana Yotovska, Juliana Ghani...) have been paid up to 2,000 levs (€1,022) to post publications on Instagram, thus monetizing their fame through social networks(3).

The new generation of influencers

A new generation of influencers emerged on social networks in the late 2010s(4). They are less active on Facebook but very present on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. These new players are more attuned to their subscribers' community and are particularly sensitive to their e-reputation. These friendly, benevolent influencers are skilled psychologists for their audience. Understanding this, they know how to win over the hearts of their followers more quickly than their elders by giving them sound advice, sometimes personally. These figures of the new generation are primarily young women. One of the rising stars is the likable Gergana Dimitrova (Geryslife or Gerydiary, 44,600 subscribers on TikTok), renowned for her freshness as much as her simplicity.

Another type of player who has found an audience among young people is the "gamer" (video game player). Those who follow them on social networks seek specialized information, ranging from the gamer's opinion on a video game they have tested to the game's release date, films, or mangas, via announcements of "web pop culture" events. Stoyan Valkov, aka 'Choco' (350,000 subscribers on Youtube), is both a gamer and a vlogger (author of videos posted on social networks) and a comedian and is one of the most popular.

Other personalities have also emerged, famous for appearing on a TV show or starring in a TV series. They don't hesitate to reveal their private lives on the networks. Actress Mona Gochev (113,000 followers on Instagram), who starred in the series Révolution Z, and artist and writer Konstantina Zhivova (12,700 followers on Instagram), for example, know how to attract a young audience by filling their profiles with photos of their babies and the products they recommend for raising them. Yanita Yancheva (1.7 million), an iconic reality TV personality, participated in two seasons of Survivor (2008 and 2014). She travels with her husband to promote his fitness classes, regularly updating their social media accounts with messages and photos. Alex and Daniel Petkanov, who participated in the VIP Brother show, also enjoyed great success on social networks (138,700 subscribers on TikTok), where they posted images of their daily lives before announcing their divorce on social networks in February 2022.

The growing influence of Bulgarian Internet users abroad

Since the return of East-West mobility, many Bulgarian nationals have lived, worked, and regularly resided abroad. Since the early 2010s, many have been making a name for themselves on the Internet, sharing their experiences abroad, or giving sound advice, particularly on cooking, beauty, fashion, love, or lifestyle (veganism, etc.). Their subscribers are mainly Bulgarian nationals inside or outside the country's borders. Indeed, expatriates often recognize themselves through these active web users. The most closely followed personalities are mainly women living in the United States. Around ten profiles are primarily active on YouTube channels, with a subscriber base ranging from 44,000 to 983,000(5). These include Bisera Kostadinov – known under the pseudonym Blair Walnuts – (983,000 subscribers), Raya Encheva

(186,0000 subscribers), who lived and studied in England before emigrating to North America, as well as Olivera Darko (149,000) and Gergana Ivanova (146,000). Two other vloggers, Antoinette Pépé (147,000) and Ellie Dimitrova (115,000), post their videos from Denmark, their host country. The two emblematic personalities are Bilyana Slaveykova, who divides her life between England and Bulgaria (23,500), and Maria Andreeva (44,000 followers on Instagram)(6). The latter lived in Provence and Nice before returning to Bulgaria, where she runs a travel blog. There are more confidential profiles, such as that of "Nelly in Korea" (6,300 subscribers), which tells the story of a Bulgarian family of musicians (Daniela and Kamelia Nasteva) who have been living in Korea for 14 years, or that of Tania Lee Antonova (2,800 subscribers on Youtube)(7), which features her mixed couple.

Notes:

(1) Facebook pages or Instagram accounts of Dilma Roussef, Roumen Radev, Boyko Borissov, Dimitar Berbatov, Grigor Dimitrov, Valentin Mitev, Martin Kirilov Bogdanov, Joro Ignatov – data collected in autumn 2022.

(2) Pages Facebook ou TikTok de Nina Dobrev, Tarkan, Preslava, Slavi Trifonov, Catagay Ulusoy, Juliana Ghani.

(3) "Naï izvestnite balgari v instagram" (regularly updated ranking of the most famous Bulgarians on Instagram, *Zdraven-bg*.

(4) Petya Angelova, "Top 10 na naï kreativnite balgarski influencari v instagram" (The top 10 Bulgarian influencers on instagram), 18 May 2021. YouTube channel or Instagram and TikTok pages of Gergana Dimitrova, Stoyan Valkov, Mona Gochev, Konstantina Zhivova, Yanita Yancheva, Alex, and Daniel Petkanov.

(5) YouTube channels of Raya Encheva, Bisera Kostadinov, Olivera Darko, and Gergana Ivanova.

(6) Yoana Yokko YouTube channel and Instagram pages of Bilyana Slaveykova and Maria Andreeva.

(7) YouTube channel of Nelly in Korea and Tania Lee Antonova. Adriana Petrova, "Kakav e zhivotat v Yuzhna Koreya s vlogarkite ot kanala Nelli in Korea" (What life is like in South Korea with the vloggers from the Nelly in Korea channel), Peika, 13 December 2021.

Thumbnail: Pixabay.

* Stéphan Altasserre has a doctorate in Slavic Studies and specializes in the Balkans.

Link to the French version of the article

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