

Politics and social media: why Eastern Europe's politicians are all attwitter

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Politicians in Central and Eastern Europe are taking to Twitter in increasing numbers – but with mixed results, finds Philipp Köker.

Since Barack Obama's use of twitter and other social media in his successful 2008 presidential campaign, more and more politicians (or their PR advisers) have discovered the power of delivering short, 140-character messages to supporters. This digital revolution has also not left politicians in Central and Eastern Europe unaffected and many leaders in the region are now on twitter. However, not all of them are using it effectively and some have even given up on it already.

It would, of course, be hard to match Obama's 26 million followers but recently Estonian president Toomas Hendrik Ilves [@IlvesToomas](#) and former Russian president and current prime minister Dimitrii Medvedev [@MedvedevRussia](#) and [@MedvedevRussiaE](#) have both advanced to moderate twitter stardom. Both tweet in English as well as in Estonian or Russian, respectively (Medvedev even has separate accounts for each language); yet more importantly, they both tweet themselves.

While Ilves' ten thousand followers do not yet measure up to Medvedev's 1.9 million followers (for his Russian account – the English account has close to half a million followers), the Estonian president has earned his followership by providing interesting posts and concise policy statements, as well as by interacting with his followers on a regular basis – his twitter feud with Princeton economist Paul Krugman last summer might be an additional motivation to follow him) Medvedev on the other hand predominantly tweets pictures from state visits including a [photo of a Finnish sauna](#) and the [view from his hotel window in Rio de Janeiro](#) and, in contrast to Ilves, prefers to [congratulate Arnold Schwarzenegger on his birthday](#) rather than engage with followers.

While most other leading politicians (or their offices) in Central and Eastern Europe have an active twitter profile – nine presidents and nine prime ministers in the CEE EU member states, Ukraine and Russia – not all of them attract such a large number of followers as Medvedev. On the one hand, this is surely due to the comparatively small size of most countries in the region which 'naturally' limits politicians' twitter audience – especially if they only tweet in their native language.

On the other hand, not all of them are active tweeps or in fact tweet themselves. In most cases their twitter profiles are run by PR staff and are only accounts of the prime minister's/president's offices. Tweets from these accounts usually lack the interactivity of personal accounts and tweet little more than links to announcements and press releases available on their websites (the Polish prime minister's office is a welcome exception in this regard).

Public relations experts are often better suited to composing poignant, yet uncontroversial messages and can also keep the account active while politicians are busy with more important things. But these accounts lack the spontaneity and interactivity twitter is supposed to bring. They also deprive followers of personal and (unintentionally?) funny tweets such as Romanian president Traian Basescu's claim that the **The Titanic would not have sunk had he been captain.**

Some politicians have therefore resorted to holding 'office hours' on twitter during which they respond personally to followers' questions. The large followership of the Latvian presidential office and active use of twitter by Valdis Zatlers (president from 2007-2011) can in part be attributed to this practice. Polish prime minister Donald Tusk has also recently increased his followership by adopting a similar approach.

But twitter is more than a means of communicating with voters and reaching new audiences. The example of Mlađan Dinkić [@mladjad](#), Serbia's Minister of Economy and Finance, shows that tweets can have actual political consequences. During the budgetary debate last November, Dinkić tweeted **a picture of the empty opposition benches** in parliament. While the debate had to be adjourned and the tweet earned him a lot of criticism, the publicity it created made sure that the benches were full at the next session. The incident shows that politicians' tweets can matter and that twitter – paired with the camera in a politician's smart phone –occasionally have the potential to improve the quality of government.

Twitter is, however, a time-consuming medium and even if a politician's staff run the account this does not mean that it will be properly maintained. The twitter profile of Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich [@Yanukovich_VF](#) abruptly ceased to tweet in summer 2011 after 18 months of activity and 1,224 tweets. Slovakia's prime minister Robert Fico [@RobertFico](#) gave up even earlier. He opened his personal account with big ambitions during his first term as prime minister in December 2009 but only tweeted five times. Within little more than twenty-four hours, the account became inactive and no attempts have been made to revive it since.

East European politicians have not yet mastered the art of twitter and few have been able to exploit its full potential. For now there are two main obstacles to twitter having same political impact in Eastern Europe that it has in the West (and especially the US.). First, while internet access in Eastern Europe is now close to Western European levels, smart phones with internet access are not as readily available to the ordinary citizen, so that much of Twitter's immediacy and spontaneity is lost. Second, as the audience of politicians' tweets in the region is limited, it is sensible for many politicians to focus their resources on more traditional forms of campaigning to communicate with their voters and get their message – in more than 140 characters – across.

Philipp Köker is a PhD candidate at UCL – SSEES. His research is primarily concerned with the use of presidential powers in Central and Eastern Europe, about which he writes an [academic blog](#). He also tweets regularly on presidents and politics in the region via [@pres_activism](#).

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