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Political Image: Between Discourse and Discursivity

Abstract: This paper claims that the study of *political* brands and today's public image of politicians is moving towards more interdisciplinary endeavors. In this respect, our purpose is to investigate the changing patterns of political communication, by briefly showing the main features of the Romanian post-communist political landscape. We propose a conceptual framework by unpacking notions from politics, communication, mythology and semiotics in order to explore the image building process of politicians. At the same time, during the analytical approach, we assume that discourses and messages represent social practices capable of generating impressions and facilitating desired relationships between politicians and voters. The second part of the paper draws attention upon the fact that the notion of public space is part of a linguistic system – covering a wide range of components: political speeches, political doctrines, symbols. Due to the overall direction of its ideological aims, political discourses actively engage in pursuing the total reconstruction of public space. Thus, discourse and politics are linked to a linguistic substratum. Aside from this in-between role, public space, also possesses a double nature. On the one hand, it guarantees favorable conditions for political confrontations, and on the other hand, this multi-faceted space generates a fertile soil to enhance communication and stimulate cooperation. In order to grasp the heterogeneous nature of political discourse, we insist upon Saussure's theory of signs combined with the logic of language designed by Wittgenstein. *In nuce*, both perspectives focus on a common concern in the political field: the necessity to invest politicians with legitimacy and authority. Lastly, we will exploit the political personalization phenomena which praises a *greater* candidate-centeredness with particular emphasis on three dimensions in the politician-voter relationship: whether politicians are in group members ('one of us'), whether they act in the interest of the electorate ('act for us' and whether they are effective in developing efficient political platforms ('deliver for us').

1. Political communication, politicians and their public image - an interdisciplinary approach

Departing from the 1950's, all across the western world, political communication, a subfield of communication and political science became powerful and autonomous. From its beginnings, this area was of huge relevance to depict the intentions and political activities of message senders as a way of observing their capacities to influence the political environment. Nowadays, political communication evolved towards an all-encompassing system focusing upon the degree of interaction between the main subjects of this process – "government (political elites), mass media (media staff) and, needless to say: society (citizens - voters - recipients of mass media)" (Gackowski 2013, 45). There is thus an insistence on the importance of undertaking a rigorous course of study on political candidates, personal language, sentence complexity, and relational tone used by politicians in their initial messages as a way to improve our current understanding of political thought, at the same time, opening new avenues on political engagement as well as a focus on imagery in politics. Thus, from where I sit, political communication is a constant interplay between discursive stances and visual symbols, both playing an effective role as markers of political realities. As such, political communication can be adequately internalized as an endless political activity having a cyclical structure. Furthermore, it must be recognized that political activities should be approached as constellations reuniting: signs and symbols, narratives, discourses, ideologies and mythological elements. In essence, the political world manifests itself as a complex utterance prepared to be decoded and debunked. The last years, bear witness to place political sciences, communication, semiotics and linguistic in the horizon of interdisciplinarity, most notably on account of an emergent context of constant campaigning – where dynamics of electioneering and strategic nature of politicians are closely intertwined.

Without fail, the study and practice of political activities focus on the strategic potential of political elites. Within the political communication area, it should not be underestimated that politicians are

fashioned and assimilated as brands (human entities). Owing loyalty to this assumption, we argue that:

> "brands are regarded as symbolic constructions that bring with them a remarkable power. They develop according to the dynamic requirements of a world characterized by a global market offer. Brands correspond to a human need for meaningful investment. They participate in a significant universe in which they speak a language loaded with elements considered valuable by community members" (Medveschi, Frunză 2018, 138).

We thus have a restorative-constructivist conviction within the political field, which reminds us that political brands do not own a static nature, but rather politicians should be regarded as moral agents gifted with the capacity to generate solutions to political crises and stringent issues on the political agenda. This particular angle of interpretation, lies at the heart of the studies proposed by de Chernatony – who does not hesitate to name brands as clusters of values (2001, 33), more precisely, social entities that are embraced by the voters. Within this political context, branding is perceived as a multilayered process overpowered by three dimensions: communication, performativity and differentiation – in order to be appealing in the eyes of voters. The long and the short of it, political brand consists of four elements: attributes, benefits, values and personality. Out of doubt, in postmodern societies a new trend is awakening. The power of mass-media gradually marks an increased tendency towards the rejection of the economic based political-marketing of brands and the pursuit of a religious dimension. Media strategists, according to Danesi, call into question a tradition which claims a devotional nucleus. These being reminded, we are inclined to accept that political brands are reshaped to offer "the same kinds of promises and hopes to which religion once held exclusive rights – security against the hazard of old age, better positions in life, popularity and personal prestige, social advancement and happiness" (2006, 10). By extension, and simultaneously brands are invested with mythological elements – translated as: "household gods, the mythic charter of our consumer culture" (Danesi 2006, 25), hence establishing what Sherry once entitled: "brand based behaviors as the principal forms of secular ritual in contemporary social life."[1] (2005, 42). It should be noted that the principle of concordance between religious and mythological items

applied to politics, on one hand, conceives the birth of trustworthy relations, and on the other hand, lightens the efforts of politicians– in reaching, expressing and investing political actions with meaning. This grand, simplifying, saving symbolic communication exchange lies at the forefront of political campaigns, helping both politicians and voters to foster their political-identity building process, deliver messages that change *a priori* expectations of voters, and, in the same time allowing patterns of personalization and celebritization being uprooted from private life and transferred westwards to the public sphere, components caught in a sketched manner in Edelman's research when stating that: "meanings are in society and therefore in men. Political symbols bring out the concentrated from those particular meanings and emotions which the members of the group create and reinforce in each other" (Edelman 1974, 11).

Political image comes out as a complex concept profoundly influenced, directly or indirectly by multiple scientific disciplines (political science, political psychology, political marketing). Despite the negotiation efforts of different disciplines to come upon a standard definition, bitter academic disputes continued unabated. Leaving aside the unvarnished dilemmas, our method of understanding the concept is centered in a socio-cognitive approach by which – the political image-designing process claims its rights as in the position of a normative mechanism, possessing a risk-reduction function in order to provide a bona-fide bond between politicians and voter, thus removing the dichotomy "us" and "them." By appealing to political communication grievances and a strategic management standpoint, eventually political image could be culminating in the political science vocabulary as: "A resource, an instrument, a tool, a process and a method to access power; to compete for it; to exercise ant conserve it. As resource [...] the political image must be used in a strategic, timely and efficient manner" (Reeves 1997, 102) in order to activate a certain type of meanings in the semantic memory of the voter. Performing a careful brand management analysis allows us to pinpoint three stages:

1. Emotional narratives – The public image of a political brand should be governed by the word simplicity. It is thus necessary to resort to verbal or written statements or visual representations which will more likely be "emotionally and intellectually accessible" (Bennett 2016, 109) to voters. It should be taken into account that these appeals must be tailored to specific human ambitions or lifestyle preferences, by this investing the public with

the symbolic opportunity to participate alongside politicians in the building-process of democratic narratives" (Blackett 2003, 18).

2. Multi-channel orientation: A vigorous public image must be spread through all communication platforms – (from traditional media – television, radios, ending up with digital platforms). In a complex media environment, "effective branding functions through the disciplined promotion of the various values, attributes and competences across a wide range of channels" (Feldwick 2003, 135).

3. Trust-building: Matching assets between politician and voters stand as a cornerstone for long-term loyalty. Usually, voters choose candidates based on candidates' personal qualities, such as: honesty, friendliness, sincerity, trustworthiness, and leadership abilities, which can be conveyed visually or in discursive manners.

2. Public space, political discourse and the logic of language

The powerful impact that language has within the shaping process of the public space can hardly be misinterpreted. Indeed, its prodigious influence in virtually every single aspect regarding the development, acquisition, maintenance and use of complex communication systems, is ultimately discernible in many research quarters, in bluntness forms. Discourses and politics, at a global level - are traditionally linked in one way or another to a lexemic stratum. Political speeches have undergone a steady, if momentous development under the aegis of political communication consultants. This was possible due to a series of procedures which are strictly attached to the political communication field: the systematic study of the inextricable relationship amid political behavior and contemporary agenda-building, the appraisal of political relations rooted in modes of persuasion: Ethos, Logos, Pathos, the investigation of verbal and written statements used by politicians, and, ultimately the exploration of political motivation, linguistic behavior and the media environment. Hence, my purpose is to show that the public space enables the development of a linguistic-political nexus - openly inviting political speeches, political doctrines and ideologies to fall under this conceptual unit.

Beside the discussions around the new trends and challenges in the political communication arena, Szanto unloads the facets of public space – understood as a battlefield in which the language of politics gathers: "a lexicon of conflict and drama ridicules, reproach, pleading and persuasion. A language designed to valor men, destroy some and change

the mind of others" (1978, 7). Szanto argues that in this conflictual space, political brands must not be perceived as mythological figures invested with mythological powers. The theoretician, instead, pledges for a more realistic approach, suggesting that quitting the associations with deities allows politicians to shape themselves as human entities "acting as catalysts for change." (Szanto 1978, 57). Adopting caution on the road ahead, Szanto – outlines that political concepts and images carry a polemical meaning. Having said that, we observe that the supremacy of subjectivity in political decisions gives free pass to establish the politically inherent friend-enemy antithesis. Also, in this conflictual scenario, we witness dramatic changes within the structure of political discourses, regrettable forms of hollow political speeches posing a risk of proliferation. In order to prevent domestic political endangers and weakening the all-embracing political units, politicians must be oriented towards building, maintaining, and reinforcing a positive public image. In this respect, Skovira purchases a typical approach to politics from a co-operation standpoint by introducing the concept of community of discourse – designed as a dynamic structure in which people share ideologies and context patterns (2010, 370). In this scenario, discourses are communication instruments invested with interconnectivity potential and socio-cultural knowledge. Speeches gravitate around (social, cultural or cognitive) functions, allowing themselves to resonate in depth with the micro to macro dimensions: (participants, identities, ideologies – shaping social action (van Djik 2009, 74-75).

        With the example of community of discourse in mind – I consider of vital importance to reach upon the outlook proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure. Within his writings the semiotician aimed to establish a political community based on a set of linguistic equations: language (*langue*) = language (*langage*) – speaking *(parole)* – limbaj-limbă-vorbire. Avoiding sterile definitions, Saussure pledged upon the importance of two factors in structuring a community of discourse: language and speech. Imagining a complete social, political and cultural reorganization of the public sphere, Saussure is one of the early proponents of language - as a social product– preaching that: "language is a phenomenon; it is the exercise of a faculty which is found in men. Language is the set of concordant forms on who puts this phenomenon in a community of individuals and one determined age" (de Saussure 2003, 132). In a quite similar manner, *Tractatus Logicos-Philosophicus*, written by Wittgenstein, was the result of a life-long preoccupation with both linguistics and political patterns. The Austrian philosopher proposed an

overall conversion of normative aspects existent within the political arena, arguing the necessity to adopt a representational theory of language which encompassed a new "picture theory" of language understood as: ("the world") (Wittgenstein 2002, 2). From this angle, political facts must be understood as fluid structures interconnected to our everyday practices and styles of life. Politicians and voters use conventionally-defined terms encoded within "language games" (Stone, 2003, 84). Based on this framework, the communication process involves using conventional terms in ways which should be easily recognizable by a linguistic community. Furthermore, it involves playing a conventionally accepted language game – with meaningful statements, only the latter ones being capable to enable a logical form in order to grasp the richfulness of the political world.

Although not all of Wittgenstein philosophical reforms were accepted, the strategic potential of Wittgenstein's synthesis taken altogether should not be underestimated, as his valuable insights represents a momentous step in reshaping the political arena. Charaudeau, fearfully argued that Wittgenstein's and Saussure's linguistic canons could be internalized from an idealistic perspective, forcing us to imagine the political arena in the shape of a perfect polis modelled by human agency, thus embedded in or indebted to an a historical structure. The new tendency shifted from an emphasis upon discourse, towards language, the latter not having to change depending on the addresser and addressee. Abolishing the equations perpetuated by Saussure, Charaudeau directly contributed – in reshaping the above mentioned theoretical assumptions, by proposing a different equation, namely: discourse = language (*langue*) + language application (*speech*) **(**Charaudeau 2001, 343). Naturally, the political field punctuates shifts and reversals. Voter-politician relations, authority, political speeches are constantly built upon different theoretical columns. In this sense, in Charaudeau's terms, speaking about discourse community is more appropriate to the detriment of language community.

3. Political personalization and political image in Romania after 1989

The study of political personalization and political imagery draws people in with the hope to entirely understand the paradoxical nature of the Romanian political regime – which by 2018 was classified as a semi-consolidated democracy. In retrospect, the attempts of the Social

Democratic Party in 2017 to limit judicial competence and underestimate a last-longing anticorruption framework fuelled the atmosphere with distrust. The decisions in question marked clearly the rejuvenation of disappointment and fear – still perceived as a prolongation of models of authority disclosed during the Ceausescu era by communist elites. Therefore, the political transition of Romania from communism to democracy, ends up, rather in bringing to surface a hybrid political culture incorporating a thickened nationalistic tendency and an embryonic form of democratic pluralism. At the same time, the concept of political personalization would thus grow in importance throughout the 1989s, in the aftermath of the Romanian Revolution. The end of the violent civil manifestations themselves could only contribute to an increased interest in the debates surrounding the above mentioned concept. Whilst recognizing the useful heuristically suggestive nature of political personalization, it must also be noted that in the context of an inexperienced democracy it is pointed to its somewhat vague usage. In any case, Karvonen perceives the overall process, as denoting "the role of individual politicians in determining how people view politics and how they express their political preferences" (2010, 1–2). Clearly difficult to situate and define, the phenomena per se are an all-encompassing belief which renders political parties in the posture of subordinates, acting as auxiliary organizations run by individual actors. It should not be surprising that, political personalization was formulated as a threat for collective identities approaches. This widespread process of individualization is merely the latest incarnation of modern political communication claiming in fact: 1.the changing structure of the political discourses and political debates due to the emergence of televisions; 2: the degradation of traditional cleavage politics.

In the political cultures, where personalized politics is sovereign, a tendency to emphasize emotional impulses over rational choices could be consistently encountered. This growing in strength since 1990, in the Romanian case points a drawback leading, indirectly, to the impossibility of engineering political doctrines, implicitly, arousing a delay in the crystallization of political proposals based on coherent ideas and concepts from a doctrinal-philosophical stance. Yet, neglecting the pre-conditions and constitutional safeguards, the lack of a real ideological axis in post-communist Romania, and the way in which an over-reliance on emotional appeals and rejection of rational choices can lead to a myopic view of the forces governing democratic systems. In this respect, a longitudinal focus shows that Liberals, Social-Democrats and genuine Christian-Democrats

between 1992 and 2009 persuasively favoured – the use of pseudo-democratic political jargons, neglecting the fact that an ideological core should lay at the foundation of their political discourse. Accordingly, the political stances and ideological platforms do not provide direct access to comprehending the richness, varieties, and subtlety emergencies/needs of the population. At this point it must be taken for granted that, Romanian political objectives, strategies, doctrines are merely associated with the character and providential role of the political leader. To the ardent question of why powerful mythological entities are chosen over other elements, the answer comes promptly – political discourses endorsed with mythological elements can be easily associated with religious aspects, providing a particular importance for the doctrinal core of charismatic leaders.

At the same time, we must recall upon the fact that, Romanian political culture has lost much of the capacity to function effectively due to the precarious structuring of political discourses and visible clumsiness in applying brand image strategies. In this point, it must be highlighted that the fundamentally degradation started back in early period of Romanian's transformation – being linked to the drastic and free of substance political, economic and social reform. Back in 1989-1999, Romania was still nourishing a state socialism nostalgia, the dawn of democracy being close related to a political shallowness – thus politicians, were operating in a fragile democratic system with inadequate political tools. In this case, the plausibility of Romanian politicians is shrinked due to the availability of two political images: one applied in extra-electoral contexts and, the other one exploited to the fullest within electoral periods – mismatch which enables us to reiterate the duplicitous nature of politicians together with the impossibility of creating a single, unitary image serving and corresponding to the term of office of politicians. Also, the Romanian politicians, fail in highlighting professional and deontological standards, being harsh and rather underdeveloped political brand, lacking the capacity to assume a pattern of accountability (either at the local or national level), creative and strategic visions in order to strengthen the notion of citizenship and generate the well-being of the population – essential pre-requisites in the political procedures. Indeed, Romanian political brands, find themselves once again in trouble in the pursue-process of collaborative layers leading to the creation of distinct types of relations based on cooperation, which are, ideological by nature, highlighting once again the inability in solving the issues of the communities which appointed them. To sum up, the

Romanian society is unable to leave the circle of infirmity, due to the lack of role-model political brands (those which possess the capacity to awaken a wide range of aspirational narratives among citizens). Incompetent charismatic political brands play an essential role in deepening the Romanian crisis, by constantly implementing crisis leadership strategies which, sooner or later will contribute to the erosion of institutional dialogue This being said, we see ourselves obliged to invalidate the possibility to fulfill the three dimensions in the politician-voter relationship: where politicians are in group members ('one of us'), where they act in the interest of the electorate ('act for us') and lastly, being effective in developing efficient political platforms ('deliver for us').

Thus, for authors like Raoul Girardet, the human a kind for religion explains the need for transmitting religious lexicon and practices from the religious substratum to secular myths and practices. The post-communist presidents of Romania (Iliescu, Constantinescu, Băsescu and Iohannis) could be easily regarded as contemporary Moses (Girardet 1997, 155). Before, during, and after the Revolution from the 1989's – the Romanian social and political context was drowning in a crisis areal – best-evidenced through the terms: despair and doubt. All four political leaders have masterfully reinforced mechanisms of political mythology, applying with success the rule of the wise shadowing the rule of the many. Arguments based preponderantly on emotional appeals soon proved to be efficient during the image-building process of a paternalist and almost messianic leader, adored and worshipped by a pre-modern, parochial and infantilized community, which in exchange was hoping to obtain security and tutelage. Without fail, political figures knew how to properly use presidential power as a way to promise improvements in the lives of Romanians. Applying a mythological perspective, the presidents have embodied the "Hero of social stability", the "Father of the Nation", "inspiring confidence in crisis situations which need horizons of stability" (Stănciugelu & Stănciugelu 2013, 281). The stability of Romania and the efficient management of the state apparatus had reached the maximum level of high esteem within the Romanian voters, whom come to praise an hybrid political system – certainly not a democratic one – but rather an utopian socialism – dominated by oligarchy and moral rectitude. In a symbolistic context, *the presidents of Romania, with their simple tastes* can be perceived as Simple Men, proposed to a public opinion tired of the constant balkanization of politics. The Common Man – prudent and experienced, suggests a "champion of normality" (Stănciugelu &

Stănciugelu 2013, 280), the only one capable in re-establishing political stability.

4. Conclusions

Linguistical components act as a spring in the mobilization of emotional, empathic, and proximity reactions, among voters. Branding and political identity in recent decades have begun to assert themselves in political marketing and political communication. Brands are meant to influence how (voters) assess the service offer of a political party or any trade organization. A holistic overview of the branding / political brands – classifies the latter as heuristic devices for voters, which appears to be an important consideration in studying candidates for elections. These elements should be understood as an associative network of interconnected political information and attitudes stored in memory and accessible when a voter's memory is stimulated. Political branding captures how an organization or a political individual is perceived by the public; the politician must be seen in a broader sense than the product, as a product has intangible functional parts, while a political brand sums up the general feeling, the impression, the association or the image the public has with a politician, a political organization or a nation.

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