The presidential political image – theory and practice

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Résumé: Le présent article analyse l'évolution de l'image du leader politique Traian Basescu au cours de l'année 2006. Des stratégies différentes sont mises en œuvre afin de construire une image publique. Ces stratégies ont été analysées et considérées soit comme positives, soit comme négatives. Pourtant, la pratique montre que ce qui apparaît comme une stratégie positive dans certains cas peut se révéler comme un inconvénient majeur dans d'autres. Le verdict appartient au public en tant que récepteur et interprète de l'image politique.

The most important political forces of the contemporary society are caught in a struggle for power. In this struggle, the spectator has the role of the arbitrator, because he is the one deciding who is going to be the winner. Lacking a method of truly knowing these political actors, the spectator has to choose a leadership concept, built and promoted through different strategies. From this perspective, it is obvious for the political figures to be highly and constantly interested in their personal image[*] that becomes a product sold to the spectator: a positive image, attentively constructed and promoted by means of various marketing strategies ensures stability and success on the political scene.

[*] The term is used here with the meaning of systematic mental associations (more or less justified) that serve to identify an object or other, a person or another of a profession or other by ascribing a number of socio-cultural qualities. Although such a use of the term 'image' is considered to be a trivialization of the basic meaning, Martine Joly (1998: 10-11) admits the often implication of this term in syntagms like 'political image', 'enterprise image', etc.

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The images of the political leaders are various and combine characteristics both from the personal sphere and the professional one derived from the current job or from the aimed one. Talking about 'political image', professor Alfred Bulai (Bulai, 1999, 186-193), finds two variants as defining, both with advantages and disadvantages: the ideal type strategy and the charismatic political leader strategy.

The ideal political leader strategy assumes building the image of the political leader on a cultural profile considered ideal. This profile differs from a society to another, from a nation to another. Still, certain common characteristics can be identified: the chosen type has to be an ideal specimen of a society; the most frequent type uses the idea of the common individual, that resembles the most of us, but is a little above the rest, through ideal typology (*ibid*., 188).

The charismatic political leader strategy is based on breaking the patterns common to the spectator. This image strategy assumes the type of an exceptional leader with natural aptitudes to lead (*ibid*, 189), and also extremely different from the common type. The characteristics of such an image strategy are that it assures greater successes than the first strategy but only on a short period of time (ibid) and is very useful in crisis situations. On a long term, this strategy proves very difficult to maintain, either because of the always changing social or political values, or by various strategy errors. The charismatic political leader strategy is centered on the hero character that is different from all the others, and in order to maintain the public interested in such a character a permanent presence on the media scene, both as subject and generator of news is presupposed. This need to always be in the eyes of the spectator can lead to exaggerations that turn a quality of the image strategy into a major shortcoming.

For a long time, the Romanian society has got used to the image of the ideal political leader, strategy approached by the previous president of Romania, Ion Iliescu. Maintained too long, without substantial improvements, this image type became inef-

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ficient. The contemporary society was in need of a new image, centered on different principles than the one mentioned above.

With a rich past on the political scene, Traian Basescu is the character that approaches the image of the charismatic political leader. The strategies to promote such an image are paradoxically combined. Basescu is not totally different from all the others, as such a strategy would suppose, but his image is different from the image of the previous political leader known to the Romanian public. Involved in numerous political scandals, criticized by image specialists and political analysts, this character still holds the monopoly in the public opinion.

His image is structured in two domains: the personal one (the common individual with strong moral and social values of great interest for the contemporary society) and the institutional one (the innate political leader highly aware of every event and very involved in every area of the society).

The 'human' side of the president is considered, most of the times, an image plus. He is the one spending time with his family, he has a rich sense of humor, appreciates good company and takes part in different cultural events. Still, this image plus is easily turned into a minus when some of these characteristics are exaggerated. An eloquent example is provided by the different festivities and parties in the company of characters with an unclear and questionable image and the populist mingling with the crowd and the debatable behavior of the president in different situations.

A major image plus is the implication of the president in different events that affected directly the lives of thousands of people, such as the natural disasters, or in crisis situations in the social sphere, as for example different strikes. Traian Basescu got strongly involved in solving these problems. Moreover, his behavior was an example for other important personalities that got involved especially in humanitarian activities. Still, this image plus can also be transformed into a minus by excessive involvement. The image of someone who cares is transformed into the image of the authoritative, close to that of a dictator that wants to control everything and gets involved in activities that are far beyond

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his attributions. This excessive involvement triggers heavy attacks from his political adversaries that, on different fronts manage a campaign to denigrate the presidential image. In such a situation their strategies are balanced by the opinions of the president's supporters who always appreciate in front of the public or of the media the innate leadership political qualities of the president. Still, this excessive involvement in every domain becomes the greatest drawback of the presidential image because it generates suspicions about causing and managing various opinion scandals and denigrating the political opponents. This image minus makes the spectator doubt and reconsider their options.

Usually, personal style influences in a good way the presidential image. Still, when this domain of the image strategy becomes stronger than the professional one, it becomes an image minus. Traian Basescu has a rich sense of humor, is intelligent in the duel of replies and open to nonconformist topics. This can be easily observed in his relation with the common people, with the spectators. Active witnesses at such events are the journalists. The relation Basescu – journalists, a great subject approached by the media and an image minus reveals other characteristics of the personal style of the president. He becomes impulsive, ironic, and easily irritable. He does not refrain from insulting the journalists or reproaching hidden interests, lack of professionalism and objectivity.

In constructing a unitary and positive image of a political leader, different forces and different viewpoints are involved. This process of building an image involves not only the political character but also other secondary characters, used as image booster or as drawbacks. Thus, the image becomes a common product of the social, political and cultural conditions of the contemporary society.

The image strategy approached by Traian Basescu, the one of the charismatic political leader is, as proved above, one very difficult to maintain and improve. Still, despite all these image pluses and minuses, these upwards and downwards on the public opinion axis, Traian Basescu owns the leader positions in the eye

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of the people. The presidential image thus created seems to be, not a negative or a positive one, but one preferred by the Romanian society at the present moment.

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