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PHD THESIS

*The role of brand communication in the image-building
process of the Romanian politician*

-SUMMARY-

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Summary

Key-words: *political brand, political image, brand values, brand strategies, political discourse, persuasion, Romanian Prime-Ministers, personality traits, leadership, figures of speech.*

Political branding is a phenomenon that has become a mandatory topic for political scientists and political communication specialists. Our research focuses on how the image of political brands (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 77; Wauters, Thijssen, Van Aelst & Pilet, 2018, p. 512) is constructed in and through political discourse (Wodak, 2009, p. 42; van Dijk, 1980, p. 46). In this regard, in the applied part of the thesis we analysed 14 speeches delivered by 11 Romanian Prime-Ministers on the occasion of the government's investiture in Parliament during 2000-2020. Through this approach we were able to obtain convincing results about the brand values (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 13) and democratic tenets that enable the construction of political image (Cwalina et al., 2015, p. 133) of the Romanian PMs.

Research methodology - discourse analysis: Overall, the complexity of the branding process (Heding et al., 2008, p. 222) and the role of brand values (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 13) in the political image-building process fully explain the need for the current research. In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question, our research is based on a descriptive and analytical approach, contingent on the method of discourse analysis (Olbertz-Siitonen, 2018/2019, p. 165). The choice of this approach is justified by the samples we have put under analysis. Moreover, the method is useful due to the combination of qualitative and quantitative accounts (Olbertz-Siitonen, 2018/2019, p. 166; Johnson, 2018/2019, p. 238). Thus, the analytical section of the study is accompanied by a quantitative sequence, presented in the form of frequency analysis (Chelcea, 2001, p. 135). We have chosen this method in order to understand the particularities that govern the existence of a political brand (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000, pp. 246-247). It has become obvious that in the light of the professionalization of political communication (Toader, 2017, p. 14) there is a need to delve into the essence of the concept of political image (Heding et al., 2008, p. 11). By essence we are referring to the brand values that comprise the professional identity (Frigioiu, 2007, p. 9) of the Romanian political brands. At the same time, it is also necessary to rethink the interaction between the two agents (Roşca, 2015, p. 25), the political brand and the audience. Thus, the aim of our study is to highlight the interplay

between interrelated core concepts: political discourse - political brand - brand values (Heding et al., 2008, p. 75). It goes without saying that, in their absence, the process of brand image-building, could not occur (Bennett, 2012, p. 37).

Perspective - Critical Discourse Analysis: The empirical part of the study is based on the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the branch developed by representatives of the Dutch and the English School of Thought (Wodak, 2009; van Dijk, 2015, p. 470). In essence, the approach implies qualitative investigations. The paradigm also confers a degree of flexibility. Thus, the quantitative component is not excluded in order to gain in-depth knowledge of the social world (Chelcea, 2001, p. 578). According to the author Ruth Wodak, CDA is concerned with the way in which power (Wodak, 2009, p. 35) manifests itself through political discourse. In a discursive framework, power is understood as persuasion (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 212). The author Olbertz-Siitonen, goes on by adding that, the process has a pragmatic purpose because "discourse is a place/space of social interaction" (Olbertz-Siitonen, 2018/2019, p. 166). Thus, in chapter VI of the thesis we focused on the relationship established between the 11 political brands and their audiences. In essence, the power of persuasion shows its effectiveness through the very agreement of the audience to enter into the symbolic relationship (Heding et al., 2008, p. 66) initiated through discourse by the political brand (Norlin, 2021, p. 164).

Teun van Dijk emphasizes in his analysis the idea that "it is the text that shapes the context" (van Dijk, 1980, p. 96). Based on this understanding, we notice that the text takes the form of an instrument used in the ceremony of the government's inauguration. The process itself represents the context that facilitates the "access to power" (Kay, 2006, p. 746) of the 11 political brands from 2000 to 2020. In a discursive context, the political brand is associated with the word product (van Dijk, 1980, p. 112). In this case, the product refers more to the output, because through interaction with the audience (Adjei, 2013, p. 1) and through a series of strategies such as "persuading, showcasing, proposing goals" (Wodak, 2009, p. 75) the political brand shapes its brand image (Heding et al., 2008, p. 11). Another scholar, Norman Fairclough, completes and confirms van Dijk and Wodak's hypotheses through his study. According to him, two types of power gravitate around the political discourse. In the process of installing a government in office, we can observe the existence of two types of power: "power in the speech" and "power behind the speech" (Fairclough, 1989, p. 74). The perspective helps us to understand that power within discourse is intertwined with

the key-concept: strategy (Norlin, 2021, p. 119). Therefore, in order to win the loyalty of the audience (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 17) we note that: political brands incorporate brand values, democratic tenets and stylistic devices into their discourse (Heding et al., 2008, p. 51; Gifu, 2011). Further, the second type of power (Roșca, 2015, p. 220) originates in the effectiveness of discourse (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 202). In other words, strategies in discourse (brand values and tenets) achieve their purpose only if they stimulate the audience and the team being governed to perform actions through joint effort (Neustadt, 1991, p. 31).

Objectives and research questions: Our research focuses on 11 prime ministers, whom we examine in their capacity as political brands, focusing particularly on the characteristics of their personal brands as they emerge from their inaugural speeches. They are Adrian Năstase, Călin Popescu Tăriceanu, Emil Boc, Mihai Răzvan Ungureanu, Victor Ponta, Dacian Cioloș, Sorin Grindeanu, Mihai Tudose, Viorica Dăncilă, Ludovic Orban, Florin Cîțu. Our approach tackles the process of public image construction (Heding, Knudtzen & Bjerre, 2008, p. 59) in and through discourse (Bennett, 2012, p. 37). In doing so, we aimed to fill a gap in the literature related to: 1. Brand values - (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 13) and the tenets to which post-december premierships adhere and which they use in their speeches for the investiture of governments in Parliament and 2. their role in shaping the identity profiles of political brands leading the government.

Political discourse becomes an all-encompassing tool: brand values, tenets, goals - with the help of which the political brand projects a desirable image (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 83) among the target audience. In this way, the group/audience acquires the quality of participant/follower (Heding et al., 2008, p. 193) of the political brand in the discursive process. At the same time, we neither underestimated nor excluded the fact that the image-building process takes the form of a common strand. Why? Because it combines tenets and features from related fields: 1. personality traits of political brands: political personhood, leadership and political leadership style (Bennett, 2012, p. 38; Karnoven, 2010; Kriesi, 2012; Northouse, 2016; Kellerman, 2018); 2. features of political ethics: brand values and tenets (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 85); 3. strategic management: political discourse as an image-building strategy (van Dijk, 1980, p. 171); and 4. tenets in the mix of communication, advertising and marketing - as strategies to promote brands (Zamora, 2010, p. 284; Cwalina, Falkowsky & Newman, 2015, p. 8).

The core of the research is reflected in the analysis of 1. brand values, 2. democratic values and 3. figures of speech found in the discourses of 11 brands which we will analyse from the perspective of the construction of their political brands in the post-Decembrist Romania on the occasion of the government's investiture in the 2000-2020 period.

The research plan, with a focus on prime ministers, was based on the following idea: the marginal role of the government leaders. The literature dedicated to Romanian prime ministers is limited to: 1. the presentation of political disputes between post-Decembrist Romanian presidents and prime ministers (Dima, 2009; Pavel, 2009) or 2. studies dedicated to the prime ministers of Greater Romania (Nedelea, 1990) and 3. the succession of Romanian governments from 1859 to 1999 (Neagoe, 1999). In general, the literature gives a privileged place to heads of state or candidates running for presidential elections (Mureşan, 2019) or to the role played by the kings during the Romanian Monarchy and that of the presidents in the semi-presidential regime (Gheorghiu, 2019). Therefore - in order to emphasize, (re)establish the image of Romanian prime ministers, the paper was structured around four specific research objectives.

We therefore set out to:

- highlight the brand values in the discourse through which the 11 political brands aim to gain the loyalty of the audience;
- to highlight the democratic tenets/values through which the political brands Adrian Nastase, Victor Ponta, Sorin Grindeanu, Mihai Tudose and Viorica Dancila increase their credibility through discourse;
- to emphasise the democratic tenets/values through which the political brands Călin-Popescu Tăriceanu, Emil Boc, Ludovic Orban and Florin Cîțu increase their credibility through discourse;
- highlight the democratic tenets/values through which the brands Mihai Răzvan Ungureanu and Dacian Cioloş enhance their credibility through discourse;

The actual research, the analysis of the 14 speeches delivered by the 11 Romanian Prime Ministers (political brands) during the investiture of the Government, aims to answer the following research questions:

- Brand values underpin the political image-building process. Which brand values are recurrent in the speeches of the social democrats PMs? What brand values are recurrent in the speeches of the Liberal PMs? What brand values are recurrent in the speeches of the independent PMs?
- 2.a. Democratic tenets/values underpin the political image-building process. Five political brands (Adrian Nastase, Victor Ponta, Sorin Grindeanu, Mihai Tudose, Viorica Dancila) are exponents of the social-democratic doctrine. Do they use democratic tenets and values associated with social democracy in their speeches?
- 2.b. Democratic tenets/values underpin the political image-building process. Four political brands (Călin-Popescu Tăriceanu, Emil Boc, Ludovic Orban, Florin Cîțu) are exponents of the liberal doctrine. Do they use democratic tenets and values associated with liberalism in their speeches?
- 3. Figures of speech underpin the process of political image-building. Which figures of speech are prevalent in the political discourses of the Social Democrats PMs? Which figures of speech are dominant in the political discourses of the Liberal PMs? How about the independent PMs?

Structure of the thesis: Since the process of public image-building (Frigioiu, 2007, p. 17) is dependent to the role of brand strategy (Cwalina et al., 2015, p. 41) this issue has been dealt within Chapter II and has only reinforced the requirement of analysing the two paradigms, positivist and constructivist, in order to identify the core elements and the impact of the brand concept in the political sphere. As such, the symbolic interaction (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 294) between the brand and the audience as well as the evolution of the brand concept could not be understood without outlining the seven waves in which the brand has developed and expanded. The first three approaches fall under the realm of positivism (rationalism): a. the economic perspective, b. the identity perspective and c. the consumer-based perspective (Heding et al., 2008, p. 21). In this respect, these research traditions in brand management are associated with the marketing communication concept (Cwalina et al., 2015, p. 68). Another, important perspective on the development and potential allure of the branding phenomenon (and one that is too little attached to economic parallels) is the constructivist one. Their claims and accomplishments can be discerned by analyzing the four orientations: d. brand personality approach, e. relational approach, f. brand

community approach, and g. brand cultural approach (Heding et al., 2008, p. 21). The latter, as their very names suggest, are detached from the economic roots of the brand concept. Therefore, the politicians' public image (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 316; Frigioiu, 2007, p. 11) is the result of a process of social construction (Heding et al., 2008, p. 53), as researchers rather prefer to study how the qualities, personality traits (Bennett, 2012, p. 22), tenets and norms can influence the political brand-audience relationship. Sticking to the debates on brand values (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 13), tenets and political behaviour, the aim of the third chapter is to define the concept of political image/political personalization. Along these lines, authors such as Karnoven (2010), Kriesi (2012), Van Aelst, Sheaffer & Stanyer (2012), Iyengar & Kinder (1987) highlight the dynamic nature of the political brand to suggest a possible re(valorization) of the relationship between the two social agents (Norlin, 2021, p. 136) political-brand and audience. Thus, researchers aim to positively restore the concept of political image (Cwalina et al., 2015, p. 133), departing from the transactional meanings underpinning the positivist paradigm approach. Moreover, the authors draw attention to yet another discredited aspect in politics. The audience's engagement with the political brand could not be achieved without a strategic tool: the media (Ellis, 2001, p. 4). Indeed, the image-building process (Frigioiu, 2007, p. 138) is crucial, but the image could not be evaluated by the public if it was not made popular through mass-media means (Davis & Owen, 1998, p. 163). As a consequence, in turn, the media contributes to 1. reinforcing the image and 2. presenting brand values and tenets that guide political brands in planning and pursuing their political path. On the other hand, other authors: Ward (2011), Mancini and Swanson (1996) point out the negative effects of the media in politics. Therefore, the focus only on the personality traits of the political brand fosters: 1. the dissolution of political ideas/solutions. 2. the importance of the aesthetic dimension (Frigioiu, 2007, p. 124) and 3. public listlessness. The image of the political brand (Heding et al., 2008, p. 59) appears as a way of simplifying the political activity.

If in the past politicians encouraged the flow of ideas, in the postmodern era, it is the flow of images that prevails. Also here, we briefly outlined some of the basic theories about the leadership process and its influence on politics, starting with the approaches proposed by Northouse (2016), Kellerman (2018), Blondel (1987), but also focusing on five types of political leadership brands and political leadership styles: the authoritarian leader (Farh & Cheng, 2000, p. 91), the transformational leader (Bass & Riggio, 2005/2006, p. 14), the democratic leader (Frigioiu, 2007,

p. 144) and the model proposed by Roger-Gérard Schwartzberg (1995). The use of the key-concepts "persuasion" (Roșca, 2015, p. 217) "personality traits" (Heding et al., 2008, p. 117), "brand values" and "interaction" (Roșca, 2015, p. 63) will be of particular importance and brought into discussion in the last three sections of the thesis.

In Chapter IV I have focused on how the brand image (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 87), a term explored in the previous chapters, is constructed in and through political discourse (van Dijk, 1980, p. 8). Thus, the three categories: 1. brand values, 2. democratic tenets and values, 3. figures of speech emerge as the core elements of the public image. At the same time, we have referred to the process of discursive construction, more specifically to the strategies adopted by political brands to persuade the audience (van Dijk, 2015; Wilson, 2015; Wodak, 2009).

The penultimate chapter V focuses on aspects of research methodology: objectives, research questions, the corpus of analysis and the limitations of the study. We used discourse analysis to highlight: 1. brand values, 2. democratic tenets and 3. figures of speech used by political brands/prime ministers of Romania in their discourses for the government's investiture in Parliament (from 2000 to 2020). Regarding the first two categories, brand values and tenets are graphically displayed using the QDA Miner analysis software (Provalis Research, f.d.), a useful tool used in mixed qualitative-quantitative research. We also plotted the recurrence of brand values, tenets and political objectives/number of mentions. Finally, I mentioned the limitations of the applied study, with the potential to extend the topic using other research tools.

Chapter VI outlines the results of the research. In addition to the individual analysis of the 14 speeches, we also used a comparative perspective. Why? To highlight the similarities/differences between the brand values (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 13) and the tenets mentioned by the 11 political brands: 1. the five social-democrats PMs (Adrian Năstase, Victor Ponta, Sorin Grindeanu, Mihai Tudose, Viorica Dăncilă; 2. the four liberal PMs (Călin-Popescu Tăriceanu, Emil Boc, Ludovic Orban and Florin Cîțu) and 3. the two independent PMs (Dacian Cioloș and Mihai Răzvan Ungureanu). In this way, we have answered the research questions raised by reviewing the literature. In the conclusions section, we highlighted that 1. personal traits, 2. brand values (Aaker

& Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 18), 3. democratic tenets are pillars for the construction of the identity profile (Heding et al., 2008, p. 60) of the political brand.

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