"BABEȘ-BOLYAI" UNIVERSITY CLUJ-NAPOCA

Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences

DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION, PUBLIC RELATIONS AND ADVERTISING

Domain: POLITICAL SCIENCE

DOCTORAL THESIS
SUMMARY

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THE ROLE OF ETHICS IN IMAGE CONSTRUCTION AND POLITICAL BRAND DEVELOPMENT. CASE STUDIES: ROMANIAN POLITICAL LEADERS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE POST-DECEMBER REFERENDUMS

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INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to highlight the fact that the political brand of leaders in Post-December Romania is built on values, which are especially ethical values, with the main purpose of increasing notoriety and creating a positive image among the electorate. In the first part of the paper, I will define the terms around which the entire thesis is outlined, namely: referendum, political image, political leadership, political communication, political discourse and communication strategy.

The purpose of this paper is primarily to reiterate once again how important these aspects are, presenting theoretical benchmarks in the field and substantiating some basic concepts. Secondly, the aim is to approach the process of building politician's identity in Post-December Romania from multiple perspectives, in order to contribute to a better understanding of the factors that influence their behavior.

The paper will aim to provide a clearer radiography of the referendums held in Romania and the way in which political leaders use them to build their image and impose themselves among political leaders in a certain period in which they work, and my main contribution is represented by the complex method used to approach and analyze the subject based on the documents studied. This paper can prove to be a valuable tool for specialists in the field, providing an up-to-date analysis of key trends at the national level.

Relevance of the theme

This thesis will emphasize the importance of personal brand, political ethics and political leadership as vital factors in achieving a standard of political effectiveness and efficiency. The ultimate goal is to raise awareness of the responsible factors in the field of political communication of the need to develop educational packages in the field of political communication and personal and political brand for current and potential political leaders. The

same training is required for potential political brand consultants and political communication specialists in order to steer the politician's agenda.

Defining research objectives

O1: To provide a clear radiography of referendums in Romania.

O2: To highlight the communicational, visual and behavioral strategies that manifest positively and negatively in the memory of the electorate during a referendum.

O3: To highlight which of the personal dimensions are used as a tool to increase cohesion in the relationship between the political actor and the voter.

O4: To highlight the main values on which the political brand of a political leader is built.

Research questions:

1. How much do politicians take ethics into account in their actions?

2. Which brand personality dimensions have added value in determining electorate loyalty at the expense of others?

3. Were there actions by political leaders during referendums that helped them raise their notoriety?

4. Which of the communicational, visual, behavioral strategies manifests positively and negatively in the memory of the electorate?

Assumptions

I1. Political leaders build a brand based on ethical values, thus trying to create a positive image among the electorate.

I2.. In Post-December Romania, the referendum was primarily used as an electoral strategy to increase the popularity of political leaders, and not as a means to reflect citizens' opinions on political issues.

I3. Capitalizing on personal dimensions, as a tool for increasing cohesion in the relationship between political actor and voter, represents, essentially, a process of strategic elaboration of discourse and brand identity.

CHAPTER I. POLITICAL BRAND, IMAGE AND MORALITY

In this chapter, I set out to raise a few questions about the relationship between ethics and politics. So, I began by showing how ethics and its fundamentals are understood. I introduced the issue of politics to argue, based on some reflections of Arendt, that it is possible to speak of a new ethics, based on when we assume and practice a policy based on discourse on equal grounds. Thus, it will be possible to establish a new basis for ethics, an ethic of speech, in which people "settle all issues through convincing mutual conversations":

space = freedom, proposed by ethics and politics.

In addition to discussions about ethics in politics, this chapter was also dedicated to the phenomenon of political branding, especially the question of whether political branding gives a unique, identifiable character to communication in the electoral campaign. The popularity of political branding has been framed as a consequence of the secularization of politics. Given that campaign messages are used to target long-term goals and have emotional connotations related to social cleavages, today's political parties and candidates could try to reintroduce emotionally resonant themes into their communication activities and thus reestablish closer links between certain groups in society and their political projects. Other reasons why political candidates are drawn to political branding could be the fit with multichannel environments and the emphasis on generating relationships based on trust.

Nowadays, branding seems unstoppable, wherever it goes. In any field, brands have turned into a social and cultural phenomenon with immense influence. The impact of brands and branding will continue to grow, so it's crucial to understand how to manage and control them.

Political communication was oriented by a series of theoretical and ideological directions universally valid until the mid-twentieth century, then it tried to aim at using instruments that have a greater and faster reach among the masses. For this reason, today's politician has understood that in order to stand out, in any political communication action, he must say things simply, to understand what everyone is saying, easily, to consume as little effort as possible in transmitting information and cheaply. The brand itself can also be considered as the measure of the success of a campaign through which a politician can build his image. At its core, the notion of brand refers to the image and reputation that a product has, and this notion appears in many contexts today. Whether it's products, celebrities, cities, companies or even politicians, we are always urged to consider them as a brand.

Certainly, commercial brands have developed in the minds of consumers much more rapidly than political brands, but the idea of extending branding to other areas, other than commercial ones, is quite recent. Political branding builds its foundations on people and their personality. This is exactly what makes it much more difficult to control compared to service branding. Today it is relatively easy to control the image and standard of a product, but when it comes to branding a political personality, it is practically impossible to control their mind and soul.

In an environment characterized by the complexity of space and diversity of political offers in the electoral campaign, the voter will have to identify and choose his preferred candidate quite easily. Certainly, completing the construction of the political image and consolidating it until it becomes a successful political brand are closely related to the use of persuasive tools. One of the decisive factors of the persuasive dimension in this relationship process is precisely political branding. By approaching this theme, we tried to highlight the factors and situations that contribute to the transformation of a political leader into a political brand. Identity, in all its various forms, has captivated both our mind and heart, because we aspire to express our need for belonging, but also our desire to distinguish ourselves and our goals from others. If identity defines the twenty-first century, branding has the ability to communicate it further. However, the central idea of the political brand is that the politician must convey, through his actions and products, a clear image of himself and his goals.

Regarding the image construction and referendums in Post-December Romania, we can say that the latter constituted an essential element in building the image of political leaders in Post-December Romania. These events influenced not only the direction of public policies, but also

citizen's perception of their leaders. However, it is important to stress that the manipulation and misuse of referendums have raised concerns about the health of democracy and the legitimacy of the political process. It is essential to continue the debate on the role of referenda in building the image of political leaders and to develop mechanisms to ensure the integrity and transparency of these processes. At the same time, citizens must be educated and encouraged to actively participate in these events in order to ensure a genuine representation of the popular will in the democratic process.

Referendums have also served as an important tool for l eaders in building a favorable public image. Participating in such events and achieving positive results strengthened the credibility of leaders in the eyes of citizens, giving them legitimacy that they could use in managing state affairs. This has become crucial in times of political or economic instability, where legitimacy is often questioned and citizens seek strong and credible leaders. Of course, referendums were also a powerful communication tool for political leaders. Through them, they were able to convey their visions, priorities and commitments directly to citizens. Major projects, such as justice reform or constitutional amendments, were brought to public attention through a referendum, thus giving leaders an opportunity to convince and mobilize citizens in their support. Nor must we ignore the risks associated with the manipulation or misuse of referendums for political purposes. In some cases, these events have been undermined by demagogic speeches, tendentious questions or subjective interpretations of the results. Such practices can undermine trust in democratic processes and distort the true picture of popular support for a particular leader or cause.

Therefore, referendums have been an essential tool through which political leaders have strengthened their legitimacy, giving them the opportunity to legitimise their decisions, strengthen their public image and communicate directly with citizens. However, it is crucial to strike a balance between the proper use of these democratic instruments and preventing their manipulation for political purposes. Educating citizens and maintaining the integrity of referendum processes are essential aspects of ensuring a healthy democracy and genuine legitimacy of political leaders.

Also, a comprehensive review of the political brand literature is extremely necessary and beneficial, not only for academic purposes, but also when talking about practitioners. In this chapter I have tried to make an effort to meet these needs. The fact that the topic of the political brand is debated clearly shows that this field of research is reactive to what is happening on the

market. As the use of political branding grew, more and more political research into branding followed. At the same time, through this chapter I tried to identify gaps and future research agenda, to develop a theoretical and practical framework.

CHAPTER II. THEORETICAL MODELS REGARDING THE CONCEPT OF ROMANIAN POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

From the perspective opened by the personal brand, one of the most relevant structures is that of building the image of leaders. This is a construction that is carried out in the spirit of values that are usually a synthesis between the values of the organization and the personal values of the leader. Therefore, leadership construction can overlap or be associated, in specific forms, with branding.

Contemporary democratic politics seems to focus more and more on actors and less on institutions or ideas. Political power seems to have abandoned its abstract nature, instead taking the form of the one who holds it. Institutions lacking a public presence seem to be doomed in the collective view, given that the electronic information age has an urgent need for personalities.

Among the different forms of leadership, the political one occupies a special place, and this is due to the importance and visibility of its effects, and not to differences related to its nature. Even so, political leadership is probably the form of leadership in which analysis has advanced the least. This does not mean, however, that studies and analyses in this area are completely lacking. They are numerous, but they manage only to a small extent to outline a unitary image of the concept, but also of the implications of this phenomenon at the level of components of social and political life.

Political theory highlights the fact that there is a direct and positive correlation between the image construction of the organization and the image construction of the leader. In other words, it is relevant to understand that institutional brand and personal brand influence each other and contribute to increasing brand value and persuasive power of political brand. The direct influences of the leader will be exerted through his personality and style, but also through certain personal characteristics he has. Basically, we refer strictly to the impact that the image of the political leader has. These direct influences are those targeted by image consultants, thus

trying to bring out a political leader in the most favorable light possible. Currently, direct influences are often mediated by the media. Thus, the possibilities to influence the electorate directly have increased significantly, political leaders having at their disposal a multitude of channels through which to convey their message. However, the fact that mass media has such an important role in this regard can lead to distortions in communication between political leaders and voters and even to the emergence of extremely large differences between the image projected by leaders and the image received by the electorate.

With the development of electronic media, the transformation of communication patterns has become the most frequently mentioned explanatory factor in literature. This is also because it is much easier for the electorate to relate to the political environment through the political leaders presented by the media. Also, the information costs paid by the voter become significantly lower. The normal reaction of political leaders, but also of political parties to these transformations of the media system was one of adaptation. The leaders have practically transformed themselves into the public image of the parties, and their discourse has had to adapt to the logic and format of television and the Internet.

The notions of "identity of the political organization" and "image of the party" are both elements that require very clear definitions in order to understand their importance in the complete formulation of a campaign plan. In order to prepare a winning strategy, it is necessary to build the candidate's image in order to gain notoriety as quickly as possible. The identity of the organization is the way in which any organization is recognized by a clear differentiation from the others. This is not a term that refers strictly to the visual elements that the political party and its leaders create, but to the sum total of all the ways in which a political organization chooses them in order to identify itself to the voters.

Many parties fall into the sin of changing their identity according to the conditions of the political or social environment, not knowing that a party is sustainable over time only if it is built with care and tenacity. The entire public image of a political party is not a set of material representations obtained by using posters, leaflets and brochures, but represents an attribute of psychic life which, along with the word, shows the human psyche how to build mental representations. Parties will always try to impose among the electorate an image that differentiates them from others. Undoubtedly, the public image of a political organization will exist only if it is recognized and seen by the public. It must send a different, unique message, communicate its main advantages. People form an image according to the essential features of

the organization, but also of its leader. For an image to form, a few elements are sufficient, but they must be enlightening in the general context.

A candidate or political leader may have a different image than the party. That is why the positive elements must be highlighted and the negative ones analyzed. The leader must "work" for the community, sacrifice himself, be honest and strong, but especially fight for the general good at the expense of his own good. It is very important that the weaknesses and negative aspects of a political leader are known by specialists in political communication. In other words, he must first expose his mistakes, not to ask for forgiveness, but to devise an effective plan of action.Once the negative elements are known, different defense strategies can be built against possible attacks by political opponents.

If we are talking about gaining notoriety of the political leader, we must specify that this is, in fact, one of the biggest problems during the stages of a campaign. If the time of a campaign is short, a stranger can be promoted through an aggressive knowledge and information campaign. Every day of the campaign, the candidate must score in the image chapter, needing a useful and very well organized promotion program.

Among the essential traits of a leader is character. It is the sum total of a person's values, experiences, and beliefs. Basically, it is a summation of morality and ethics, which can inhibit the temptation of compromises and urges the personality not to tell untruths at times when circumstantial lies would be quite appropriate. Character urges the leader to responsibility and honesty. Accountability is also necessary for a position of political leadership. This makes the leader complete a project and ensures that something is well done. A responsible individual must necessarily have the ability to act without being told to do so beforehand. A responsible leader is a leader who can be counted on. One of the essential qualities of a successful leader is mastery of emotions, but also firmness. The latter is actually the leader's ability to analyze alternatives and find solutions to problems without hesitation.

Over time there has been a lot of discussion about leadership and authority, some authors have even created extensive manuals on leadership, however, I believe that anyone interested in the field of leadership and authority should start studying, first of all, the model of Max Weber. He says that legitimacy is not nourished from a single source, distinguishing between three types of legitimacy, which lead to three different forms of political regime: legal-rational, historical or traditional, and charismatic or personal. In this paper, these concepts will be assimilated with three types of leadership: traditional, rational-legal and charismatic.

Max Weber's analyses are important from the point of view of our theme not only to understand the typology of leadership, but especially for the meanings we can draw regarding the wide variety of possibilities of image construction. It is based on a plurality of values. Starting from Weber, depending on the values used in image development, we can identify types of leaders, who represent as many ways of materializing brand identity, in our case political brand. Beyond any differentiations, we find that a feature commonly encountered in leadership construction can be highlighted, relevant also from the point of view of political branding, the ethical vocation implied by assuming the quality of leader.

CHAPTER III. REFERENDUM

In the early days of social life, social organization was based solely on the social instinct of individuals, and life was reduced to the primary needs, to the needs of the rudimentary instinct of conservation. However, the first social organization began with a single authority. When defining the referendum, we must do so with greater care, because it takes many forms, and each of these forms brings with it consequences, its varieties being different from country to country, even if in its sense, this definition is universally valid today. This difficulty in defining the referendum also comes from the international scientific community, which has not reached a consensus on the typology and classification of the referendum.

Following the radiography of the referendums in Romania made in this chapter, we must emphasize that the referendum is not a destructive or radical instrument of direct democracy, but is one that has constructivity in its essence. This instrument can obstruct legislation that is beneficial to the country, but also that which is harmful. Of course, it can also be seen that in a referendum, the population occupies a direct, but still limited, role. For example, in referendums on legislation, citizens do not formulate the law or debate, except in public meetings, but they only vote on a final decision regarding it. Precisely for this reason, it is necessary to debate the ethical character of the referendum, based on the radiography of Romania's referendums made above.

Certainly, the personality of the leaders was an extremely important factor in the referenda, as they could influence the voting decision of the electorate. We refer to personality as the summation of the physical appearance, temperament, character, intelligence and political style

of a political leader. The personality cannot be changed, but a political leader can better master certain attributes, adapting to what voters expect. The development of mass media has played an extremely important role when we talk about how post-December political leaders have illustrated their legitimacy towards citizens. We can see this in the referendums after 2000, when the mass media was sufficiently well developed in our country that most voters had access to it. It was precisely through mass media that political leaders could make their characteristics more visible, helping to build the portrait of the politician and forming political preferences among voters. The electorate will always feel the need to identify with one of the political leaders, and they will do this not only with their political ideas, but also with their human side and temperament.

We can see in the referendums on impeachment of President Traian Basescu in 2007 and 2012 the suspicion and dissatisfaction of citizens, this being due to inefficient strategies. The fact that a leader may lose support from his supporters may be due to lack of authority and incompetence. In this case, in impeachment referendums, we can see that the President has lost legitimacy due to accusations made against him by the opposition regarding the abuse of power. These accusations have certain legislative consequences, but from the voters' point of view, they can either create a hostile attitude towards the political leader, as in the case of the 2012 referendum, or support the case of the accused, as was the case with the 2007 referendum.

The development of mass media has played an extremely important role when we talk about how post-December political leaders have illustrated their legitimacy towards citizens. We can see this in the referendums after 2000, when the mass media was sufficiently well developed in our country that most voters had access to it. It was precisely through mass media that political leaders could make their characteristics more visible, helping to build the portrait of the politician and forming political preferences among voters. The electorate will always feel the need to identify with one of the political leaders, and they will do this not only with their political ideas, but also with their human side and temperament.

During the 2009 referendum, Traian Basescu conducted a campaign using negative electoral connotations, being in the position of a representative public authority with great importance in the political system. In doing so, he distorted the very purpose of the referendum institution, the president considering himself able to use it for personal purposes. It is precisely this that represents the greatest danger to which popular consultations are subjected, namely that the initiator of the referendary act may deviate, through the question put to the vote and

mainly the way it is drafted, the referendum from its main purpose, namely to know the will of the citizen. Given that we look at the referendum in this way, we can say that it is only an instrument through which the public can be manipulated and dominated by one man, this domination being made over the entire body politic. It can also be used as a way to marginalize certain institutions in government for the benefit of others.

In the case of the 2009 referendum, we can say that the structure of Parliament and the reduction in the number of MPs do not fall under the constitutional notion of "issues of national interest", nor should a national consultation have been initiated on this issue. This is a problem with regard to public authorities, not the relationship between them, which is why we believe that it can be solved through the mechanisms of representative democracy, not through direct democracy. This referendary act of November 2009, initiated by the President of Romania at that time, Traian Basescu, had all the features of a plebiscite, representing at the same time a culmination of the conflicts existing between the President and Parliament, which took place until that moment. This plebiscite was initiated by the head of state with the precise purpose of increasing his popularity, increasing his citizens' support, because, if we refer to the topic of this act of public consultation, it is an extremely sensitive one for the citizens of the country, as it has no place in a democratic state that puts Parliament at the center of democracy.

Regarding the 2018 referendum, during the campaign for it, several political actors tried to use it to promote the values they support. This referendum on the traditional family seems at first glance to be about values. Liviu Dragnea said he would vote and opt for the "Yes" option, because he was a child raised in the countryside, with values and an Orthodox education. At the same time, the former Prime Minister of Romania, Dacian Ciolos, urged Romanians not to be fooled by this referendum, because Liviu Dragnea, PSD president, has only one plan through this public consultation, and it is not linked to traditional family values. He also said that PSD is using this referendum to hide or cover up other problems the state is facing, trying to distract attention from them. This point of view can be considered by many to be a correct one, given that, a few months before the referendum, protests took place against the Government and against the PSD, led by Dragnea, who tried through this referendum to convince citizens to vote for the same idea as him, meaning that the Social Democratic Party and Liviu Dragnea used the referendum to prove that the citizen agrees with their policy. The PSD leader has publicly threatened several times that through this referendum he will prove what Romanians want, namely that they believe in the values in which the Party believes, these

values being of a moral nature, despite the fact that he and the party were booed by protests across the country.

If we talk about the 2019 referendum and how political leaders used it to build their image or to endanger the image of the opposition, Senate President Calin Popescu-Tariceanu made numerous statements claiming that the country's President, Klaus Iohannis, is using the referendum to enter into a political game. Even Romania's Prime Minister Viorica Dancila has made it clear that she will not vote because Iohannis is using the referendum only in his and his party's interest, therefore she is determined not to vote in the referendum. The President's response to these accusations is that PSD is trying to boycott the referendum and that they have been attacking the judiciary ever since they came to power. Certainly, if we look at this referendum from a political point of view, there is a great risk that the President, as initiator of this referendary act, has assumed. If the quorum was not met, society regarded Iohannis' opposition as the winner, and all image capital would have flowed to PSD and party leader Liviu Dragnea. This indicates that the success or failure of a referendary consultation affects its initiator.

As we can see, any political campaign, whether it is carried out for a referendum or for another type of elections, is based on 3 important factors, namely the political opposition and its actions, media institutions and campaign actions. The latter is directly influenced by the first two factors. Therefore, we can say that the result of a referendum is to a large extent related to the people who promoted it and the image they have built up to that moment.

CHAPTER IV. PRACTICAL PART

METHODOLOGIES

In an attempt to find out as much as possible about the role of ethics in building the image and developing the personal brand of political leaders in post-December Romania, I

chose to use the interview and sociological inquiry as research methods, the questionnaire being used as a tool for collecting quantitative data.

Qualitative data from interviews will be useful to understand the topic of research from the perspective of people working in the political field, thus offering the opportunity to explore and understand the participants' opinion on the topic approached, based on everyone's experience. This information, together with the answers from the questionnaire applied to citizens, will help to outline the topic and confirm or refute the hypotheses of the present research.

INTERVIEW

The main data will be collected using the interview, in this case a semi-structured interview will be used. A semi-structured interview has a more or less rigorous structure, questions can be recorded during the interview, and the way questions are asked is flexible. The interviewer may intervene to clarify some questions or answer the ambiguities of the interviewees (Berg 2009, 105). The interview will be a formal one, with an interview guide to ensure the collection of similar data.

This approach was selected to strike a balance between structure and flexibility in the data collection process. A semi-structured interview offers the opportunity to use a more or less rigorous structure, allowing open-ended questions and adaptation to the specifics of the topics discussed. Also, the way questions are asked is flexible, offering the opportunity to explore topics in depth and get rich and contextual information. During the semi-structured interview, questions can be recorded, which provides detailed documentation of the discussion and answers given by participants, and this is considered crucial to ensure accuracy and detail recorded in the research. It is also important to mention that the interview formality contributes to standardizing the process and reducing the risk of bias in interpreting and recording data, and the interview guide serves as a directive tool, ensuring consistency and comparability of the collected data.

The sample for the interview was a non-random one, choosing people working in the field of political science, thus using convenient sampling. This type of sampling involves

selecting people who are available for research and generally appeals to people to whom the interviewer has access either through their own knowledge or by choosing people in the vicinity. We chose non-random sampling because it gives us the opportunity to select subjects that have characteristics and experiences relevant to the research topic. Also, this type of sampling has been used due to the fact that the present research is one with limited resources, considering that it is quite difficult and at the same time expensive to approach a random representative sample.

QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire provides a controlled and standardised environment for data collection and questions can be clearly formulated and presented in the same way to all respondents, thus ensuring objectivity in data collection. We can also achieve a larger and more diversified sampling of participants. Thus, the results can provide a more representative perspective on the opinion and perceptions of political leaders in post-December Romania. Another advantage is that they can be distributed to a large number of respondents simultaneously, without requiring the physical presence of the researcher. This method can save time and resources compared to research methods involving, for example, discussion groups. Of course, respondents have the opportunity to answer questions anonymously, which can facilitate the expression of sincere opinions or perceptions, especially in the context of studying ethics in building the image of political leaders, in this way, anonymity can reduce social pressure on participants. Of course, we considered this tool to be suitable for measuring quantitative variables, providing data that can be statistically analyzed to identify patterns and trends in the perception of ethics in the construction of the image of political leaders.

In this questionnaire, factual or socio-demographic questions, opinion questions were asked. Closed-ended questions and one- or multiple-choice questions were also used. The sample for the questionnaire is a random sample, as everyone could have had the chance to participate in this sociological survey.

The questionnaire was applied online using the surveymonkeys.com platform. Using the application of the online questionnaire ensures a high degree of coverage of the surveyed population, a higher degree of freedom and a high degree of responsiveness, however some

limits would be the impossibility of guaranteeing the representativeness of the survey sample, the impossibility of verifying the sincerity of the answers.

CONCLUSIONS

In this summary, I will make a brief correlation between the answers of the interviewees and the respondents of the questionnaire.

As regards the perception of ethics in the political field, a similarity can be observed in the responses received through both research instruments. On the one hand, specialists say that it is essential for political leaders and professionals in this field to act ethically and take responsibility for the common good (Alfred Bulai). Brindusa Palade argues that ethics has a central and extremely important role in evaluating political processes, but especially in electoral evaluation. On the other hand, most respondents to the questionnaire state that there are certain rules and moral principles that must be respected in the diversity of activities of political leaders. Therefore, the correlation indicates a consensus between those surveyed and political communication specialists, suggesting that there is a perceived and recognized need for ethics and accountability among political leaders to ensure good governance and public trust.

Another topic addressed both in questionnaires and interviews was related to belonging to a political party and what this implies in terms of credibility, image and ethics. One of the specialists (Brindusa Palade) said that political leaders are willing to associate with certain political parties in order to preserve their credibility, but there are also many cases in which they rather lost by this association, being compromised with parties that showed cynicism. 31.93% of respondents to the questionnaire when asked about the importance of the political leader's membership in a party claim that this aspect is important to very important. We can therefore stress that considerable value is placed on the political affiliation of leaders.

The personal characteristics of politicians have been a benchmark for us when discussing image construction. There is a little discrepancy here. Dumitru Borțun refers to credibility and moral values as having a significant role in influencing the electoral decision. Alfred Bulai argues that any personal characteristic can bring a benefit in building the image

of a politician as long as it is a positive one. Vladimir Paşti tells us that the ability to connect with voters and charisma can greatly help a political leader build a positive image. Therefore, charisma prevails in the specialists' view. Following the 213 answers to the question about the personal characteristics of politicians, charisma is among the last places, only 14.55% choosing this characteristic. Among the most important for them, however, are intelligence (67.61%), responsibility (67.14%), competence (60.56%) and seriousness (58.69%).

As regards religious values in the perception of the electorate and political communication specialists, a certain discrepancy was also observed. Except for specialist Dumitru Borțun, all other experts firmly stated that religious values can certainly be used in building a strong political brand, and this can happen especially in Romania, which is a very religious country. Specialist Alfred Bulai believes that, most of the times, religious values are directly associated with tradition and stability, Vladimir Easter fully agreeing with him. On the other side are the respondents of the questionnaire who are rather in agreement with the specialist Dumitru Borțun. Only for 24.41% of them is moral religious conduct important.

The results obtained demonstrate that the personal brand of political leaders in post-December Romania is indeed influenced and shaped by values, especially those of an ethical nature. These values are the foundation on which the public image of leaders is built and are used as a means of increasing notoriety and creating a positive image among the electorate.

Analyzing the actions of the political leaders studied, we noticed that they frequently resort to promoting ethical values such as integrity, transparency, accountability and justice.

It was also found that the ethical value of a political leader is often contrasted with the negative perception of corruption or abuse of power in the political sphere. However, it is important to mention that building a political brand based on ethical values is a complex strategy and is not always without challenges because the speeches and actions of political leaders are not always consistent with the values promoted.

It can be said with certainty that ethics is the basis on which a positive political image and a solid political brand are built. A positive political image, based on ethics and integrity, will always strengthen a leader's political brand and attract the support and loyalty of the electorate. At the same time, a strong political brand can contribute to strengthening and promoting ethical principles in the political sphere, creating a virtuous circle between ethics, image and political brand.

In conclusion, this paper contributed to understanding the process of building the personal brand of political leaders in post-December Romania, highlighting the importance of values, especially those of an ethical nature, in this process. By promoting these values, political leaders aim to gain more notoriety, gain voters' trust and create a positive image among the electorate. Also, the research carried out within this doctoral thesis brought light to the complex and interconnected aspects of the main topics debated: ethics, image construction, leadership, referendum and brand. In view of future research, we can explore other important electoral periods or strategies of a particular political leader, thus improving our understanding of the role of ethics in image construction in the political field. This paper represents only an initial step, and further research in this direction could make substantial contributions to the evolution of knowledge of the importance of ethics in political communication.

Therefore, this doctoral thesis not only fulfilled the objectives initially proposed, but also opened new horizons for further research. We believe this contribution will serve as a solid starting point for future researchers who engage in exploring the complexity of the role of ethics in image building among political leaders in post-December Romania.

However, it is essential to recognize that building and maintaining a positive image involves constant effort, and the success of this strategy depends on the complex interaction between leaders, their values and public perception.