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**The Personalization of Political Communication in Social Media Era. Case
Study: Gabriela Firea, The Mayor of Bucharest**

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Abstract: Social media era brought a major change in the way politicians communicate online with their voters. Social platforms are bringing politicians closer to people and communication is now more interactive and more personalized. The paper examines how a woman politician, the mayor of Bucharest, the capital city of Romania, uses social media to promote personalized messages in daily political communication during an ordinary period of office. Politicians use personalized communication in the online environment to transmit both personal information about family life, religious orientation, personal experiences, and to disseminate information of public interest that has not been made public by traditional media. This fades the boundary between what is public and what is private. There is a broad agreement on the fact that the personalization of the political message must be studied as a multidimensional phenomenon (Holtz-Bacha et alii, 2014; Nave, N. et alii, 2018) being “a natural consequence of transformations at the level of political and media systems, at the level of society and public culture” (Toader, 2017) transforming politicians into “intimate strangers” (Stainer, 2007). The research analyzes the personalized messages on the Facebook page of Gabriela Firea, the mayor of Bucharest, between 1st of July and 31st December 2018 on quantitative criteria, as well as the reactions of the online public and is part of a larger research work that approaches the triad of women political leadership, social media (Facebook) and political communication from a multidisciplinary perspective.

Keywords: political message; Facebook; individualization; social media reactions;

1. Introduction

Social media brought a major change in how politicians communicate online with their voters. Social platforms bring politicians closer to people and communication is now more interactive and personalized. Politicians are exposed to public space both as professionals and as private individuals. Social media, especially Facebook, highlights politicians as individuals rather than as members of a political party, thus causing the political arena to embrace personalized communication, providing the context that favours the personalization of the political message.

Political communication is becoming more personalized, politicians seem to choose a role to play and “the image of politician prevails in relation to the personality of the politician”. Politicians prefer to improve their public image and citizens come into contact more with “virtual realities” and less with face-to-face politicians. (Fărte, 2004/2005, p. 106) Social media allows emotional connection with users

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and generates authenticity around a political leader, so he is perceived as trustworthy, authentic, and close to citizens. (Enli, 2015).

Also, social media has introduced in the political communication the notion of permanent campaign. Although many previous research has shown that the online efforts of politicians and parties are largely centered around electoral periods, Strömbäck considers that “campaigns are permanent, with varying intensity” (Strömbäck, 2007, p. 54), which resonates very well with the services offered through social media and more specifically through Facebook.

2. The Professionalization of Political Communication and Personalization of the Political Message

Professionalization of political communication as a relatively new concept is analyzed by theoreticians in different socio-historical contexts. The idea of professionalism first appears at Max Weber as a distinction between the occasional politicians, the people who were politicians as their secondary occupation and the professional politicians. Citizens are considered to be occasional politicians when they vote, participate in a rally and hold a political speech. Those who support and participate in the political struggle, popularize candidates’ speeches, are militants of the political party are included in the category of politicians as secondary occupation and those who live exclusively from politics and “have qualified in the struggle for power and in the methods of this struggle” are professional politicians (Weber, 1926 apud Toader, 2017). Camelia Beciu states that the process of professionalization characterizes the current political communication and the interest was awakened by the “process of modernization of the electoral campaign and political visibility practices” (Beciu, 2011, p. 232).

Most of the studies define professionalism by focusing on the technical aspect, which is “a permanent process of self-refinement and change to result more efficient ways of achieving the activities, whether it is to win elections, reach consensus, gain support for certain policies, or effective governance.” Professionalization was the result of the decrease in number of people who want to become members of a political party as well as the changes in voters behavior that are pragmatic, “willing to not vote for the same political family each time.” (Papathanassopoulos, Negrine et al, 2007, apud Beciu, 2011)

Starting from these changes, politicians and parties are adapting their type of communication, adding to the bourgeois ideological communication, emotion and narrative, trying to make it attractive. This trend is defined by Florența Toader as a “complementary tendency to professionalize political communication and consists of personalization”, making appeal to emotions or the cultivation of negative campaigns, manifested in media discourse as “marketing effect, potentiated by web 2.0 emergence, becoming the constituent of the new medium of communication.” (Toader, 2017).

2.1. The Personalization of Political Communication

The personalization of political communication is a complex phenomenon studied at different time intervals, if we refer to periods of elections or periods of exercise of power. Another distinction is given by where the personalization takes place: in the media, the communication of the party/candidate or the communication of government/of the voters? This research will focus only on analysing the messages posted by the a woman politician on her Facebook page, which can be considered “the self-personalization of the politician”.

There is a broad agreement on the fact that personalization is and must be studied as a multidimensional phenomenon, being “a natural consequence of transformations at the level of political and media systems, but also at the level of society and of public culture.” (Toader, 2017) Social media is

characterized by the “fluidity of the boundaries between the public and the private sphere, between professional and personal time and activity, in other words, the public level of private life and the privatization (personalization) of public life.” Also, digitization does not only mean the deletion of expert/amateur, global/local, commercial/non-commercial, limits etc., but it has also brought the supremacy of visibility. (Roventa-Frumușani, 2015, p. 30)

Political actors have accounts on social networks, develop their own style of communication and do not depend exclusively on centralized communication of the political party, communication thus leading to individualisation as “individual political actors have become more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identity”.¹ This personalization is highlighted by the increased visibility of candidates and leaders. The visibility of personal life on Facebook has the characteristics of “new journalism” in terms of time of production/reception: fragmented audiences, public microspheres, decontextualizations and recontextualizations (Roventa-Frumușani, 2015, p. 31).

Van Aelst et al. (2012), analyzing leadership-centered communication, approaches the concept of individualisation as a dimension of “presidentialisation” because leaders are prominent not only in relation to representatives of other parties but also outside the electoral period, being the core of political communication.

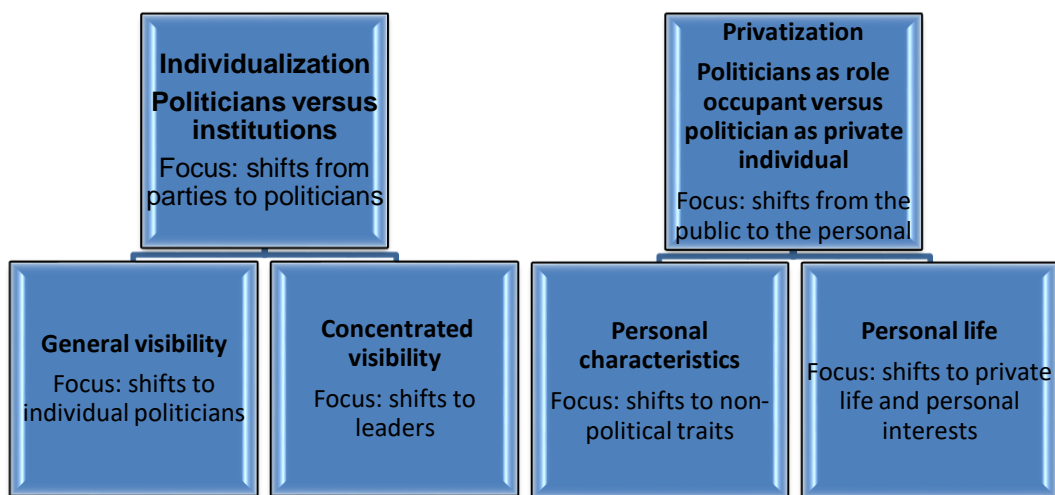


Figure 1. Personalization size in news (after Van Aelst et al.)

Political people expose themselves to public space both as professionals and as private individuals. Political communication through social media turns political people into “intimate strangers” (Stainer, 2007, apud Toader, 2017, p. 39) that we get to know sufficiently closely even if we have never met them. “The politician identifies with voters, revealing his qualities, passions, fears, weaknesses or sharing information about his personal life (family life, religious orientation, personal experiences).” (Toader, 2017) Politicians pay enough attention to their image as private individuals and voters evaluate them in this way.

Social media liquefies borders, roles, identities and spaces, and we assist both in privatizing public life, in disclosing private life, and in dismantling and rebuilding virtual public space. (Roventa-Frumușani, 2015, p. 33) Social media, such as Facebook, emphasize the individual politician rather than the political party, thus expanding the political arena to enhance personalized communication. Research by Gunn Sara Enli & Eli Skogerbø shows that politicians “report both marketing and dialogue with voters as

¹ See (Karvonen, 2009, apud Holtz-Bacha et al, 2014, p. 156).

motivations for social media use, and their practices varied, social media marketing has been personalized and has involved private exposure and individual initiatives.” Politicians’ motivations to use social media for marketing purposes were reflected in the actual use of these platforms for many citizens. The preferred social media platform for marketing purposes was Facebook. (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013, p. 770)

Balmas and his colleagues distinguish between centralized and decentralized personalization. Centralized personalization implies that power flows come from the group (eg, political party, cabinet) to a single leader (eg party leader, prime minister, president); “Decentralized personalization means that power is transmitted from group to individual politicians who are not party or executive leaders (eg candidates, MPs, ministers). (Balmas et al., 2014, p. 37).

2.2. Factors of Personalizing the Political Message

Researchers have recently paid attention to the analysis of political messages posted in social media in terms of their effectiveness, starting from the question: *Why are some political posts more successful than others?* Thus, Nave, NN, Shifman, L. & Tenenboim-Weinblatt explored two main groups of factors with major implications of Facebook use: *content involvement and self-presentation*, generating a six-character model that promotes the success of a political post: implied emotions, humor, the use of first person, self-exposure, personal position and clues that evoke anger. (Nave, Shifman & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2018)

Emotional factors, emotional triggers, improves reactions and determines user involvement. The inclusion of emotions in the message proves to have a positive impact on the levels of involvement, with emotional content, generating a greater number of likes and comments (Lee et al., 2014; Nave et al., 2018). Posts that contain a positive message may become viral compared to those that have negative content. Individuals typically prefer to be known as people who share optimistic stories, or making others feel good, rather than hurting them. Also, even if the message is negative but triggers a high emotion like anger, it is likely to become viral (Berger & Milkman, 2010; 2012, apud Nave et al., 2018). Thus, powerful emotions trigger immediate reactions such as online content sharing.

In terms of *cognitive factors*, various studies have shown that users tend to react to those messages that have content that adds cognitive benefits without requiring extensive cognitive effort. Two main features of the content are associated with this duality:

a) *novelty and relevance*, there being a positive association between these two attributes and the commitment of users (Malhotra et al., 2013; Tafesse, 2015; Berger & Milkman, 2012; apud Nave et al., 2018).

b) The easiness of decoding and simplicity are important features of content spreading; (Malhotra et al., 2013; Mauda & Kalman, 2016; Sabate, Berbegal-Mirabent, Cañabate & Leberherz, 2014 apud Nave, N. et al., 2018).

Behavioral factors are partly associated with the call to action that refers to explicit engagement requests manifested through preferences, comments, or sharing, encouraging users to spread further. In the context of Facebook, it was found that even a simple request to post increases both likes and comments. (Lee et al., 2014; Malhotra et al., 2013 apud Nave et al., 2018).

Self-presentation refers to politicians attempt to control the impression on others, being known as impression management. The phrase of impression management belongs to Goffman who claims that all social situations in which two or more people are involving one’s attempt to convince others of his own definition of the situation. Impression management implies that actions, occurrence, involvement,

and so on, provides data about the intent and purpose of each person. Some of these impressions are deliberately given, while others are given unintentionally. Goffman defines performance as all the activity of a particular participant on a given occasion that serves to influence in any way any of the other participants (Goffman, 1959, p. 26). The Internet and social media have transformed self-presentation into a tool for building and negotiating self-impressions (Sebastiao, 2013). Various studies analyse the link between self-presentation and social media on the background of political personalization trends, exploring the way people appear in digital spheres and reveal personal information. In a political context, self-presentation is closely linked to the personalization of politics - a process of growth in prominence, power and individuality, to the detriment of political party or ideology. (Balmas & Sheaffer, 2016; Karvonen, 2007; apud Nave et al., 2018)

3. Methodological Design

This study quantifies the messages of mayor Gabriela Firea - the first women mayor of Bucharest, the capital city of Romania, posted on Facebook during a normal term, from 1st July to 31st December 2018.

The author of this research chose this period because it is important to investigate personalized political communication during an ordinary period of office, most of the studies in this area focusing on the analysis of the electoral period.

The objectives of this study were to identify the use of personalized messages by the mayor of Bucharest on Facebook and the reactions of the public.

3.1. Results

Gabriela Firea, the mayor of Bucharest, is a woman politician in full political ascension and uses both traditional media and social media in her public communication. The Facebook page of the mayor is one of the most appreciated pages of Romanian politicians and has 490,761 fans. According to an analysis made by Point Public Affairs with Webstyler (2017), the first place as number of fans on Facebook is occupied by President of Romania Klaus Iohannis, followed by former Prime Minister Victor Ponta and the mayor of Bucharest Gabriela Firea. The largest engagement on page, that is the total number of interactions (likes, comments and share of posts), is on President Iohannis page with 2.9 million interactions, followed by former Prime Minister Dacian Cioloș with 1,8 million interactions and mayor Gabriela Firea with 918,000. (<https://www.iqads.ro/articol/43034/topul-politicienilor-romani-in-social-media>)

During the analysed period, the mayor of Bucharest posted 154 messages, out of which 25 are personalized messages. This research has classified as personalized messages those posts that had personal content related to family, holidays, leisure activities, participation in private events, promotion of participation in television shows. This study does not take into account the religious messages that are the subject of another recent research.¹

The most personalized messages were published in September 2018, while in August 2018 the mayor had no personalized posts. Details of the number of posts per month can be found in the figure below.

¹ See (Dogaru-Tulică, 2019).

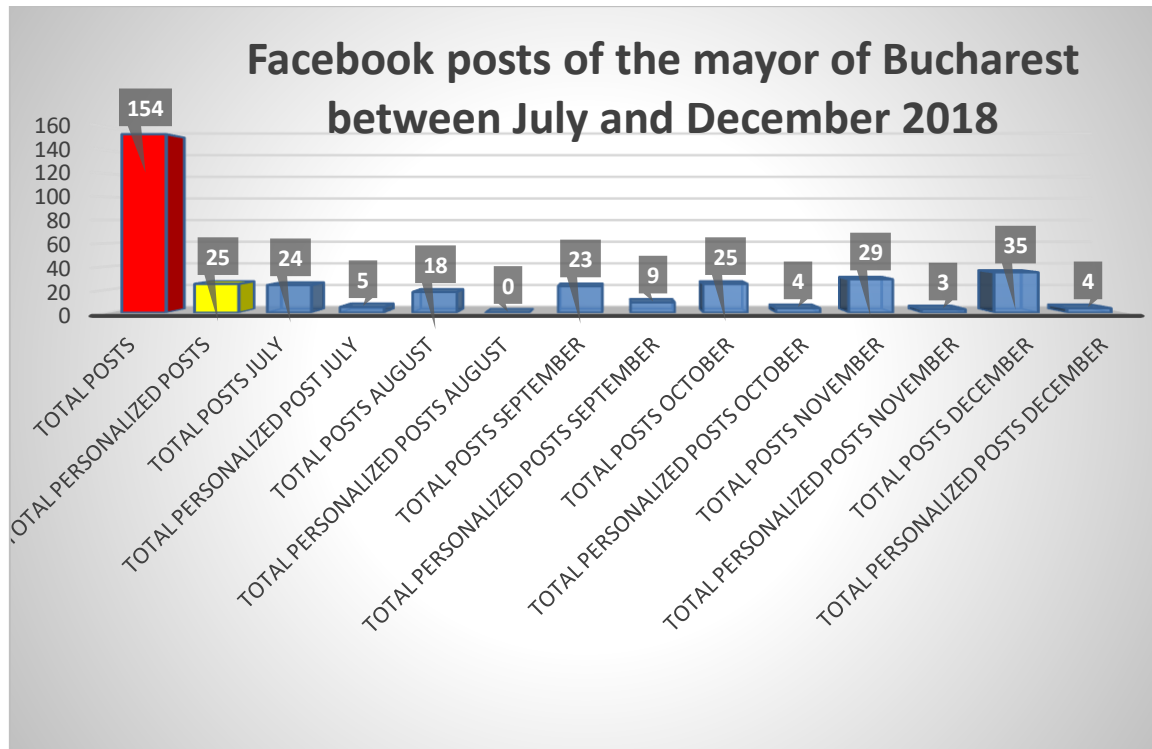


Figure 2. Facebook posts of the mayor of Bucharest during the analysed period

The personalized messages from the analysed period totalised 40744 reactions from the fans of Gabriela Firea’s Facebook page. Of these reactions, 37576 were positive.

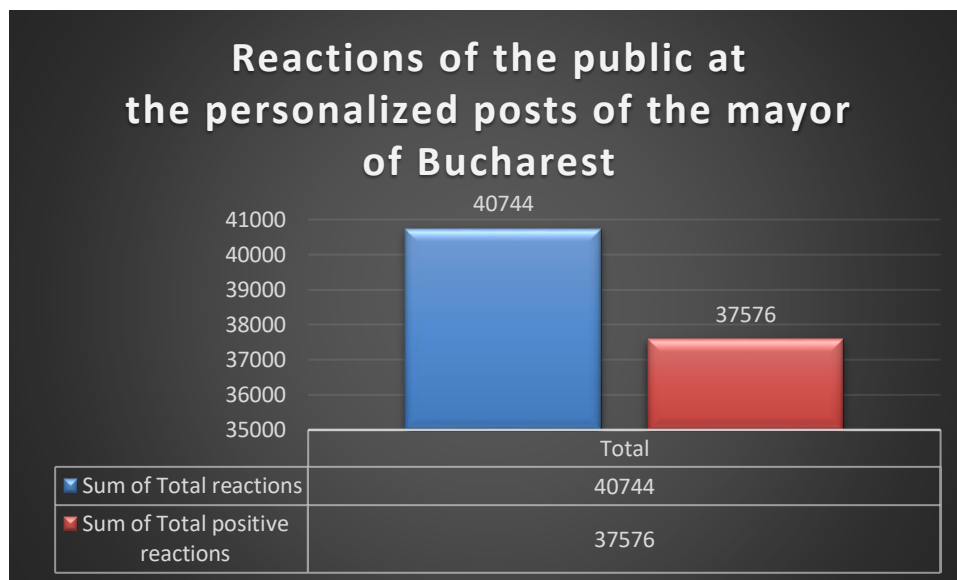


Figure 3. Reactions of mayor Gabriela Firea fans on Facebook

As positive reactions, the analysis took into account the first four emoticons available on Facebook.



Figure 4. Facebook emoticons for reactions to posts

The post with most of reactions from the analysed period was the message from September 12, when the mayor posted about the celebration of 8 years of marriage. This post has 4200 reactions, of which 3900 are positive. At the opposite end, the message with the least reactions is the one from December 22 when the mayor wished Happy birthday! To a family member named Anastasia, post that only gathered 321 reactions.

4. Conclusions

Social media is a favored context for personalized communication. Politicians use the online environment to both transmit personal information and to popularize their presence in TV shows, the media, or to share personal information that has not been made public by the traditional media. In this way the border between the public and the private is blurred. As the present research argues, in the particular case of the mayor of Bucharest personalized messages posted on Facebook attracted an impressive number of reactions and most of them are positive. Although balanced as number compared to politics and administration issues, the constant use of personalized posts and the positive reactions it generate are part of an online communication strategy meant to bring the politician, in this case the mayor of Bucharest, closer to the average user. In this way, the average user can identify in the politician's preoccupations and preferences, his own concerns, preferences or individual values.

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