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MEDIA COVERAGE OF POLITICIANS' PARTICIPATION TO RELIGIOUS
EVENTS

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Abstract: Politics and religion are two concepts that have constantly intertwined throughout history and continue to do so at the start of the third millennium. Previous studies show that religion plays an important part in the political life and the concepts of state and church are connected. Although there are also certain discursive manners in which the Church adapts to political and socio-economical contexts, it is much more often that the connection between the two spheres of communication (political and religious) comes from the part of politicians. The article deals with notions such as pseudo-events, media spectacle, political marketing and using religion as a tool for political positioning. The current research is based on an analytical descriptive method: the media content analysis. The focus of the analysis is on the highest rated daily print media and it covers the period from 2007 to 2010. It checks the prevalence of politicians in the media coverage of religious events on the most important religious holidays of the year: Easter, St Mary and Christmas. The most relevant results of the study show that the intertwining of politics and religion is often negatively reflected by the media. The results are a necessary addition to previous studies (Iancu and Balaban) that had only focused on a quantitative analysis of politicians' media coverage during religious festivities.

Key Words: religious events and politicians, media coverage, image, agenda setting, pseudo-events, media spectacle, religion and politicians

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Political communication

Political communication is best defined by first looking into Wolton's ideas on the political field, which is the concept that offers the formal context where political debate can take place. This formal context regulates the political life through norms, laws and values, and it is also responsible for giving voters the possibility to compare political parties and politicians. These comparisons are to become attitudes and opinions, and finally they contribute to the decision to vote for one politician or the other. At its basics, according to Ghilezan, political communication is "a planned and sustained action meant to ensure a climate of goodwill and understanding between the organization and the public."¹ A definition that further develops the previous is that it is "a form of communication that refers to the transmission of intentional and targeted messages with political content, messages that are mediated by means of mass communication or by other means and actions; an informational transfer and counter-transfer that is attained in a field of action that is well defined, at a given moment in time, using techniques and methods of political actors' image building, which has the purpose to make a positive connection between politicians and the public opinion."² Denton and Woodward also insist on the fact that the content and purpose of the message is what defines political communication.³

Political communication can be defined as „purposeful communication about politics”⁴ or „as a space where diverse means of persuading the public intersect”⁵.

Political communication takes place in a space where three key actors share a contradictory debate, each of these three having a legitimate position that allows them to publicly express their point of view on politics: the politicians, the journalists and the public opinion, through opinion polls (cf. Wolton⁶). In each case, we are talking about a different kind of legitimacy:

- the representative legitimacy – for political parties and politicians
- the statistic or scientific legitimating – for the public opinion (opinion polls)
- the information possession and usage legitimating – for the journalists (media).

Franklin⁷ does not include public opinion in the debate and notes that „the field of political communication studies the interactions between media and political systems, locally, nationally, and internationally”. He argues that political communication focuses on the analysis of: the political content of the media, the actors and agencies involved in the production of that content, the impact of political media content on the audience and/or on policy development, the impact of the

political system on the media system, the impact of the media system on the political system.

Besides the informational function, media also educates the audiences regarding the meaning of specific events, ensures the platform for political discourse and free expression of the public opinion, publicizes political institutions' activity (serves the watchdog role) and supports different political points of view.

But the main contribution of media to the political process is the agenda-setting. It is essential that they adapt to a fluid political field, in order to preserve the role of catalysts of political discourse. Journalists communicate policy direction or political positions of key actors. Journalists "enter political life events in the narrative scheme, enabling the presence of events as subjects of news"⁸.

Politicians' religious events attendance becomes therefore a potential pseudo-event for journalists to write about or broadcast in the media. Politics changes under the influence of media channels development and it becomes more and more difficult for the politicians to engage in media management activities.

Hypotheses

There are four main hypotheses connected to the subject of politicians, media and religion, that the study is aimed at verifying:

H1: if a politician is in an important official position, his participation to religious celebrations is more likely to be represented in the media

H2: if politicians participate to and use religious contexts for political PR purposes, then this will be reflected negatively by the media.

H3: the shorter the time between the religious holidays and an election, the more likely it is that the media will focus more on the political figures participation to religious celebrations

H4: political discourse during times of religious holiday touches upon religious topics and Christian values.

The relationship between politics and religion

Politicians use political communication messages having in mind two different outcomes: first, to inform and to persuade, and second to address an individual's cognitive side by attempting to change his attitude. The latter is a more difficult task, as it involves appealing to one's personality and emotional side. The religious message also addresses this part of the individual psychology, which is why it is often met in connection to the political message.

First, the most simple intertwined messages (religious-political) are the non-verbal ones. These refer to the mere presence of politicians, next to church officials, at various events, in an attempt to gain from an image

transfer. This does not go to say that all public appearances in religious contexts are part of a political PR strategy, as we can assume there are two situations in which a politician can find himself:

- a) to have truly disinterested religious beliefs
- b) to be aware of the persuasive power of religious discourse, which can be intertwined with the political message to gain greater resonance in the individual and collective mentalities, and therefore can be used as an election campaign tool

However, since there is no objective method to determine whether a politician is part of one of these categories or the other, the population and the media could assume that all of politician's dealings with religion have an electoral purpose. Therefore it is possible to test the hypothesis that the presence of politicians in religious contexts is negatively reflected by the media, who will judge it as a dishonest, theatrical way of earning votes. (H2) It is a risk that has been briefly dealt with in a previous study, *Religion and Political Communication during Elections in Romania*.⁹

The above mentioned aspects are also fully understood by the church officials, who, even if they might want to avoid the contact with politics, they cannot always do so, as both politics and religion are part of the same national system of values. Therefore, this study also has the possibility to check what the church's position towards politics might be, and if such a position is manifest during the period of religious holidays.

There are certain moments when a connection between religious and political communication is more likely to be made. Such moments are those when state officials such as presidents, ministers or members of the parliament are invested. The otherwise profane procedure is accompanied by elements of religious ritual, such as taking an oath to serve the country, holding the hand on the bible and adding the words "So help me God!" This is a ritual not only derived from tradition, but also meant to raise the politician's credibility. It is, however, impossible to scientifically research how many of the politicians involved actually believe in the religious ritual that they subject themselves to. Furthermore, the ritual is mandatory, and participating in it is not necessarily done by choice from the part of the person taking the oath.

However, another moment when this connection is obvious and is more likely to be voluntary, is at times of religious festivities. These are the moments when politicians choose whether to participate or not in the various ceremonials. Their participation can be part of a political communication strategy. Our analysis shall therefore focus on these periods of time to monitor the media's reflections of this intertwining.

There are, however, two factors that we must take into account when monitoring the media during times of Christian celebration:

- if politicians use these moments to gain popularity, then they should be more likely to do so in the years when there is an electoral stake (H3). Previous studies have indicated that the

number of articles that present politicians to religious events is higher in the very pre-electoral year, instead of the electoral year itself.¹⁰ However, this is worth verifying based on a larger sample of articles, such as the one this article proposes. The aforementioned study of Iancu and Balaban, however, does not go any further than this quantitative analysis and does not address H2 (an analysis of the negative connotation that religious appearances can receive). This is why the current article may be a necessary addition.

- the national media will most likely reflect, at these times, actions and discourse from the part of the politicians that benefit from more visible roles in the state (such as the president, the prime-minister and the president of the main opposition party) (H1)

Also, it is quite normal to assume that during the days of religious festivities, especially if they happen to coincide with a period of electoral campaign, the discourse, the slogans and the terms that politicians use, would touch upon subjects concerning religion and Christian values in general. (H4)

Although our analysis is solely based on the print media, we acknowledge that much of the phenomena under research would also be visible in other types of media, yet those types of media, such as television, are much more difficult to research retroactively. Hence our preference for the print media content analysis.

The role of the media

The classical model of the democracy theory states that mass-media is meant to distribute and disseminate information about public and political issues, to correctly inform the citizens in real time. Blumler¹¹ states that the normative democratic standards influence the actions of mass-media in a democratic society. Therefore, media:

- supervises the daily events which can influence the citizens' day to day life, but can also create pseudo-events meant to increase the audiences;
- identifies the main social-political issues;
- creates a necessary debate platform, that can facilitate the access of minorities or other marginal groups;
- transmits the different elements of political discourse;
- analyzes the activity of the officials, institutions and other public agents, in order to make them feel accountable for their own actions;
- stimulates the civil activism;
- ensures editorial autonomy;

- shows respect for the public.

Media management

Brian McNair presents the meaning of “media management” not as referring to those engaged in the professional work of managing media organizations, but as the wide variety of practices whereby political actors may seek to control, manipulate or influence media organizations in ways which correspond to their political objectives. Therefore, media management comprises activities designed to maintain a positive relationship between the media and the politician.

Each of the two has a specific interest in maintaining this interdependent relationship. Alison Theaker¹² states that “the relationship between politicians and the media, and more importantly between the government and the media, will obviously involve a struggle between what are apparently two different sets of interest. The journalist is supposed to be attempting to seek out and present the facts, while the politician will want to ensure that a news story reflects the ‘message’ that he or she wishes to convey.”

It is a win-win situation. Politicians provide media with news or entertainment, while having some influence over the way they are presented to the audience. “But, as with advertising, media management has increased in political importance in parallel with the advance of mass communication, television in particular [and new media, we might add], which has provided even more opportunities (and dangers) for politicians to harness the efforts and skills of professionals, and through them seek to influence public opinion”.¹³

Political parties, leaders and PR officers have become steadily more appreciative of the implications for their media management efforts necessity. Media management can sometimes carry the possibility of failure. The intelligent articulation of a candidate’s image can be fatally undermined by one simple mistake. Media has gradually learned to read the practices of image-management and to discount them. Many politicians are seen as image hunters when they attend religious events. Religious events attendance has therefore become a strategic resource for the political candidates, allowing them to gain increased prevalence in the media. The “good Christian” image becomes a mask for the political figures struggling to be perceived by the electorate as “a common fellow”, as one of their own. The identification between the candidate and the typical voter is seen as an essential link.

Image managers and political strategy specialists advise their clients to seize any opportunity for appealing more attractive to the audience and therefore to gain their trust, and nevertheless, their vote. “All effective communication strategies contain what is called a positioning statement, a clear analysis of *what* the brand (or company, person, political party etc.)

is for: *who* is it for, and *why* anyone should be interested in choosing it”¹⁴. Religious events attendance is just another dimension of differentiation for the candidate in the eye of the voter.

But media does not report political issues impartially. Reality is redefined and we take part in a negotiation process between the media and the politicians for the prevalence of one of three types of reality: the objective reality (including events that have taken place), the subjective reality (as it is perceived by political actors and citizens), and the constructed reality (referring to the manner in which politics is reported by media).

Pseudo-events

One side of this constructed reality is made up of *pseudo-events*, term coined by Daniel Boorstin¹⁵ in response to what he saw as the increasing tendency of the mass-media to be preoccupied with unreal, unauthentic, manufactured happenings or synthetic novelties. His definition of a pseudo-event contains the following elements:

- a) it is spontaneous, but comes about because someone has planned, planted or incited it;
- b) it is planned primarily for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced. Therefore, its occurrence is arranged for the convenience of the media. Its success is measured by how widely it is reported. Time relations in it are more commonly fictions than factious;
- c) its relation to the underlying reality of the situation is ambiguous;
- d) it is usually intended to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.¹⁶

Pseudo-events are directly associated with the growth of media and their need to fill the space with information. Politicians saw this media need to turn events into news as an opportunity to collaborate with media channels in order to be presented in the media. Mc Nair considers that “it created a new species of event, the *created by the politician* event, with the connivance of the journalist, which provided the latter with material and the former with coverage. The public however, were not necessarily provided with anything of significance or value in helping them to formulate political choices.”¹⁷

Typical pseudo-events in Boorstin view are: interviews with politicians, news releases, party rallies, press conferences and ‘leaks’ – most of which, if not all, were of little value as rational political discourse. Religious, cultural and sports events in the electoral period become sets for this type of pseudo-events media covers and political candidates exploit at a maximum level.

Nowadays, the abundance of pseudo-events presented in the media is just a simple reflection of the way in which the rise of advertising and public relations in politics’ “expresses a world where the image, more

interesting than the original, has itself become the original. The shadow has become the substance".¹⁸ Politicians that are declared atheist are seen at religious events displaying opinions according to Christian values, acting in religious rituals and exhibiting religious behaviour.

PR consultants argue that by using pseudo-events, they are actually doing the electoral process more democratic. Denton and Woodward note: "Consultants further argue that they make elections more open and provide access for reporters to candidate strategy, views and campaign information"¹⁹. Some might argue that this is a cheap attempt of justifying their unorthodox strategies of presenting the politician to the public with any opportunity they get.

The public space and its spectacle

Politics has changed under the influence of media development. "Some other time, politics meant ideas. Nowadays it means people. Or rather characters. [...] The political man [he said] tries more and more to impose an own image, able to capture and to catch the public's attention. This image is a reproduction, more or less accurate, of himself. It is a series of features selected to be represented to the public opinion. It is a selection, and a re-composition."²⁰

Politicians are obliged to have a distinctive image, one that is able to individualize one in the public space. Once shaped, this image must be promoted by different means, so that it reaches public opinion.

In order to gain the attention of the public, their trust, and last, but not least, their votes, the politicians have hired professional specialists in marketing, PR, advertising, sociology and psychology. Their role is to "calculate" and plan the entire public presence of the candidate. "These specialists are more interested in turning their clients into a selling product than in increasing the degree of public information or in contributing to the development of democratic practices. This situation has had a great impact on electoral campaigns. The main purpose of a campaign is that of persuading the electorate of the product's qualities and distinctive characteristics. Political communication aims at persuading people. In modern electoral campaigns, image has become more important than the candidates strategy. Therefore, the campaign strategies aren't thought out to match the "product", but the political "character" is adapted to the market needs."²¹

But increased marketing and PR interventions have contributed to the electoral *star-system* (cf. Schwarzenberg) one can easily observe in the political arena. In this *public space*, redefined by Reyna based on Habermas as "the place of political participation, understood as an expression of interest and deliberation, to control decisions and power"²², Coman debates upon the *spectacle of the political phenomenon*²³. "Focusing on the media representation of political personalities has as a consequence the

increasing size of any dramatic and spectacular confrontations. This trend is materialized by *dramatizing*²⁴ particular ritual and political events, which lead to the privileging of festive moments and forms of manifestation of political life: Conventions (Congresses) parties, parades and electoral parades, extravaganzas visits, symbolic gestures, face to face debates in TV studios, ceremonies and celebrations²⁵. Religion is by all means such a topic aimed to attract attention and to stir controversies. It is probably the most universal form of spectacle that people can relate to.

Currently, we can easily observe the inclination of the media towards spectacular acts. This kind of behavior encourages the political marketing strategies that promote orchestrated scenes, shocking statements, gorgeous and surprising appearances. "On the other hand, these media events have come to have more political weight and more social impact than usual manifestations of parliamentary political life, government or political party."²⁶

This *spectacle of the political phenomenon* leads inevitably to some forms of presentation and specific procedures that are close to entertainment. This trend affects the language of the articles, as well as journalistic format (debates are replaced by talk shows, ideas interviews by portraits interviews and so on).

Making politics into a live show can lead to the change of citizens' position: from active civic citizens into an uninvolved spectator of a political show: "Election campaigns are conducted through the media, and citizens participate only as an audience for the media [...]. Like any form of artistic expression, the show focuses particularly on compliance scenarios and symbolic achievement of specific interests of different actors in the show, and less on accurate diagnosis of the situation and solving the real problems".²⁷ Another term brought into discussion by professor Coman is the *affect*²⁸ of the messages. This dimension derives from the fact "that most media outlets are economic enterprises, which should bring profit and are therefore obliged to draw large audiences. They favor the news or entertainment with dramatic content, because this type of behavior has the capacity to capture and maintain audience's interests."²⁹ The politicians and their advisers are trying to exploit this trend by placing "easy to understand" content messages or by translating complex or controversial issues into languages and formats specifically to the entertainment business.

The role of PR consultants in image building

Hannah Arendt wrote, in "Du mensonge à la violence", that "politics is made, on one hand, for the "trumping up" of a certain "image" and, on the other hand, for the art of making this image a credible one."³⁰

Many voters make an emotional choice when choosing a specific candidate. They do not take into account the rational aspects of the

message. Image is more important than ideology. Therefore, says Barry Richards³¹: “A fundamental problem in the emotional dynamic of the political leader is given by the tension between the wish to have leaders that are just like us (that feel like us) and the necessity of leaders that are different, who we believe can lead us due to their exceptional qualities they possess”. It is a constant balance between the *common man image* and the *charming, charismatic leader* (according to Schwartzberg’s typology).

In order to become popular, this image must be clear, without contradictions and easy recognizable. These being universally accepted requirements in the electoral marketing, most of the political actors try to respect them in the process of building a campaign image and that is why candidate’s images often overlap. That’s when differentiation methods intervene. The first step in this process is the positioning of the political actor on the market, or in different words, providing him a place in the mind of the voters based on the target it addresses and the promise of value he states. And since the vast majority of Romanian voters are active Christians, positioning oneself as being religious is a must. Also to support such positioning, Șandor and Popescu³² have shown that for the Romanian public, there is an important connection between politics and religion. Their study proves three main points that are relevant for our study: (1) that Romania is one of the most religious countries in the world (based on the World Values Surveys), (2) that high levels of religiosity are partially correlated with a preference towards strong, authoritarian political leaders, and, most importantly, (3) that there is a very strong correlation between religiosity and the belief that politicians that do not believe in God should not occupy public positions. Therefore, the probability for politicians to position themselves as religious is very high: “It must be underlined that the post-communist Romanian politician considers it is a necessity to make use of his position as a chosen believer.”³³ Bratosin and Ionescu regard the way politicians use this context as building a *para-democratic aura*, an inheritance of the patriarchal *anointment*.

Yet, the *Public Opinion Barometer*³⁴ proves that 82% of Romanians consider religion to be an important or a very important part of their life, whereas roughly the same amount (83%) view politics as of little or no importance to their life. Interestingly enough, the same study shows that the more people regard religion as being important, the less they are satisfied with their government. So, these results could justify a more reserved position towards religion when politicians build a marketing strategy.

In political marketing, positioning represents the place a politician holds in the mind of the electorate comparing to his counterparts, especially due to his image and political offer. Politics being an inmost competitive environment, flexibility, creativity and clear strategy become key ingredients for the electoral success.

Media channels are not just mirrors reflecting the issues in a community, but also filters that can ease or hinder a political career. Media can set the focus on the agenda on some higher stakes; it can prioritize the issues of the moment.

Jacques Gerstle (2002) emphasizes the fact that besides their main role of disseminating information to the citizens, media factors promote more and more cultural and entertainment contents, which carry fewer and fewer political information. "As the information turns into screenplays, dramatizes and transforms into a show, fiction elaborates symbols, values, behavioral patterns and perception schemata that influence the way in which political reality is being presented to the public."

In her book "The Campaign Manager", Catherine Shaw advises candidates to "take advantage of events that are already happening [...]. Plan to attend events that are likely to get media coverage, and let the press know that you will be there. When considering what these events might be, look to your persuadable vote and not your base. Sending a candidate to events that reinforce his or her stand on a particular issue or to an event that is already largely supported by the base takes precious time and energy from the candidate."³⁵

Politicians carry a full scale "battle" for the media: "Loosing this battle implies political failure. Things are even more complicated than they seem to be: on one side, winning the electoral battle cannot be conceived without winning the battle for the presence in the media, on the other side, it could be this media presence that can cause the disaster. Due to the fight for audience, the journalistic appetite for situations when politicians are caught off side becomes more manifest every day. And the downfalls for the politicians are more numerous and harder to be avoided."³⁶

Coman³⁷ claims that the programs presented by the media are populist, and have nothing to do with political doctrine. At the same time, the author claims that media representation of politics is generally regarded with lack of trust from the part of the public.

Based on their cause and communication capacity, *political events* can either be genuine, original event, media, or framed events.³⁸

In order for a political event to become a media one it must:

- refer to a political actor (the one that carries the political capital of the event)
- the political actor has to disseminate the messages in his intention to gain media representation
- the media channel used has to be favorable to the theme or to the politician
- there has to be a target, an audience for the message to be received

- there has to be a political context justifying the politician's presence in the media.

Participating in religious events is seen as a proactive PR technique, designed to attract positive media coverage for the politician. These specific events are perceived by the journalists as *newsworthy* (Galtung and Ruge model³⁹), based on their: actuality, currency, proximity, continuity, uniqueness, simplicity, expectedness, exclusivity, size, personality, negativism and elite nations or people. In the news the significance attributed to the event by the journalist is more important than the objectivity of the real facts (Kepplinger⁴⁰). This way, media turn into a co-author of the political discourse, through the message interpretation they give. Frequently, the news narrative is influenced by „framing” logic. Journalists select certain aspects that are consistent with the news, in order to match them in the big picture. Kepplinger named this action „an instrumental frame of facts” or „event management”.

Method

In order to test the hypotheses, a content analysis of the Romanian media was used. As part of the analysis, the main daily newspapers, with national coverage, as seen on the official list provided by BRAT⁴¹ were selected: *Cotidianul*, *Gândul*, *România Liberă*, *Libertatea*, *Jurnalul Național*, *Adevărul*, *Evenimentul Zilei*. Adding to these 7 daily newspapers that have been ranked as the most read by Romanians in the past few years, in the sample there was also an 8th publication, *Ziarul Lumina*, the only daily Christian publication with national coverage. Although it has a religious background, the latter is also concerned with such topics as politics, society or public health. In order to test the connection between religious and political topics for discussion, we chose to monitor the media only during and around the main Romanian religious holidays, as it was thought to be an auspicious period for political actors to theatrically prove their Christian values. The following holidays were taken into the sample: Easter (both Catholic and Orthodox), Holy Mary (or the Assumption of Mary) and Christmas. Also, a look upon the past 4 years was considered relevant. As a consequence, the dates used in the sample were:

2007 - 8, 9, 10 April, 15, 16 August, 24, 25, 26 December
2008 - 23-25 March, 27-29 April, 15, 16 August, 24, 25, 26 December
2009 - 12-14 April, 19-21 April, 15, 16 August, 24, 25, 26 December
2010 - 4-6 April, 15, 16 August

All the articles for the 8 publications, during these periods, were collected from the online archives that were available to us. Although in most cases the archives were well organized and easy to handle, there were cases of faulty systems of archives, which did not return the full

results, neglecting some of the articles in the issue, thus making it likely that the researchers lose some data.

Results

The first issue that the analysis touches upon, is the prevalence of articles which are, in one way or another, connected to political topics or politicians. More than 3000 articles were taken into account, out of which ultimately 347 proved to have political content, which represents 10.85% of all media content. This prevalence is average. It shows that at times of religious holiday, there is not necessarily a higher degree of political concern on the media agenda setting. However, it is important to test whether this prevalence varies from year to year, in connection with the important election dates. For this comparison, we will follow the table below:

Year	Year description	Number of articles with political content and/or politicians
2007	Pre-election year. Also, the year of the referendum to suspend president Basescu and a year of election for the EU Parliament	117
2008	A year of both local and parliament elections	94
2009	Presidential elections	107
2010 (partial, without Christmas)	No important elections	29
Total		347

The differences between the prevalence of articles with political content and/or politicians involved does not vary very much from 2007 to 2009, as these are all important election years. Yet, there is an important difference between these years and 2010, which is a quiet year on the political stage, as there is no important election nearby. Of course, at the time of this study, 2010 was not over, but from 2007 to 2009 there is an average of roughly 18 political articles in the sample that are published around the Christmas celebrations. Therefore, even if we were to add 18 to the current number of 29, the final result (47) would still be considerably lower than average (106). This could be an indication of the fact that the presence of politics in the media, during religious holidays, is used as a tactics for political communication, in order to prepare for some type of election.

Yet, hypothesis H3, is not fully confirmed by the above results. Although 2010 is a year with less intervention from the direction of politics towards that of religion, the data regarding the period 2007-2009 is inconclusive as to whether there is a higher prevalence of political figures

in religious contexts during years when there are electoral stakes. In fact, 2008, which hosts more than one type of election is a relatively “slow” year regarding politician’s presence during holidays. This seems to confirm Iancu and Balaban’s results regarding pre-electoral years being more active than actual election years.

In order to further detail the context in which the 347 articles are written, it is noticeable that there are two categories of articles, in terms of their connection to religion:

- Articles that, though political in content, and published during religious holidays, are not explicitly connected to religion, and are therefore “business as usual” or on the usual agenda of the media
- Articles that are political in content, but also religious, due to the celebration context

130 of the 347 articles are in the latter category, which represents more than a third (37.46%) of all articles with political topics. This proportion could have been higher, had we not taken into consideration the Catholic Easter into our sample. At the time of Catholic Easter, if it does not happen to coincide with the Orthodox Easter, the media is far less concerned with covering the holidays, as the Romanian vast majority is of Orthodox denomination. Therefore, at these times, the articles are almost always in the category of “business as usual”. This goes to sustain that political events can become of media interest only when there is a major public involved. It supports the idea of the political phenomenon being concerned with being a live show, a parade of spectacular statements and actions at a time when there is a high visibility in front of the public.

Concerning the *prevalence of politicians* within the entire sample, there are great differences between the main actors in the political arena. A rather predictable outcome is that Traian Băsescu, the president of Romania, is the most visible politician at times of holiday, not only due to his official position that requires him to give official speeches, but also due to the fact that he remains one of the most controversial Romanian politicians of modern Romania, the subject of a great deal of editorials. The president is explicitly present in the sample a total of 113 times. These appearances are of mixed connotations, some of them extremely critical, while others quite benevolent. The second most encountered politician in the sample is opposition leader Mircea Geoană, who benefits from 64 appearances. Also, a politician that is very present in the sample is Emil Boc, current prime minister and former opposition leader, with a total number of 62 articles that refer to him.

Except for Mircea Geoană, there are also many other Social Democrat leaders that are very visible: Adrian Năstase – 28 and Ion Iliescu – 20 and more rarely Marian Vanghelie and Victor Hrebenciuc. Yet, references to Social Democrats are often times made in a completely negative tonality and are not explicitly connected to religious festivities.

Liberals, however, are far less present in the media during religious celebrations. Călin Popescu Tăriceanu, although the prime-minister until late 2008 and one of the most important politicians, is present only 33 times, with the vast majority of these appearances in non-religious contexts. Religious discourse is, by definition, not a top priority for liberals, and especially for the pragmatic figure of Tăriceanu, who attends festivities less often than others. Once again, this goes to suggest that attending religious events or choosing not to do so is viewed as a way of strengthening an existing PR political strategy. The connection to religion is valuable only as long as this is in line with the image of the politician. Another liberal leader, one that, as Tăriceanu falls from power in late 2008 and early 2009, begins to take his place, is Crin Antonescu, also not very present in our sample (12 appearances).

Other politicians that are prevalent are Sorin Oprea, an independent, who is mentioned a great deal of times in 2008, prior to the mayor elections in the capital, Bucharest, but also in the context of local celebrations of Christmas.

Gheorghe Flutur, one of the leading figures in the Democratic party, is also often times mentioned, mostly during the Easter festivities, when he is involved in a huge media spectacle concerning the transportation of the *Holy Light of Jerusalem* from Israel, by private plane, which is then distributed in all of the country, as a result of a cooperation between various religious figures, politicians and private sponsors. However, the event was portrayed in a critical way in the media, generally reticent to religious actions of political figures and, even more so in this case, as the whole event was considerably expensive. In any case, the event had all of the particulars mentioned before as part of the media spectacle, proving that politicians, as well as the media have an inclination towards spectacular acts, including actions which regard religion.

The surprise of the analysis is that Romanian political figures that are known for their extremist nationalistic and religious views, who *ab initio* would have been likely to be seen in the media during religious festivities, and who we would have expected to give speeches on these occasions, are offered very little coverage. We are referring to George Becali and Corneliu Vadim Tudor, with 16 and 5 appearances respectively. However, some of these appearances are very much influenced by a Christian values discourse.

Therefore, H1 is partially confirmed, as the politicians most present in the media during religious holidays are most times the leading officials of the country. There are only partial exceptions from this rule, as the liberal prime minister is far less present than the other high profile politicians.

As for the *connotations* with regard to the presence of politicians, the media is often times critical. It is not rare that journalists become sarcastic towards politicians who place themselves in religious contexts. The press

tends to see this as an attempt to win over the preferences of the public, a gratuitous publicity stunt that does not come from altruism or Christian ethics. This type of reflection in the media can be seen in the extract below. In most cases, the title is self-explanatory:

<i>Title of the article (abridged and translated)</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Quotes (abridged and translated)</i>
An electoral Easter with the head of state	09.04.2007	A criticism of Basescu's electoral behavior on Easter.	<i>He did not miss the opportunity to swim in the crowds⁴²</i>
The Easter offensive	10.04.2007	A subjective overview of the conflict between president and Prime Minister. Negative towards politicians in general.	<i>Anti-presidential parties have ceased their offensive on Easter, only because they do not have much to show anymore.</i>
SILVIU SERGIU: Bread, circuses and...mineral water	10.04.2007	A criticism of Basescu's electoral behavior on Easter.	<i>On Easter, president Traian Basescu competed prime - time supremacy with Jesus Christ. (...)he looked for things to do in the locations with the most electoral potential.</i>
On Navy Day, Bănescu decorated a ship	15.08.2007	Critical towards Basescu. <i>Swimming in the crowds</i> is mentioned again, as is the controversy of awarding the high priest Teoctist an important decoration, post-mortem.	
On St Mary's Day, Romanians could not rid themselves of politicians infiltrating the clergy	15.08.2007	A large number of politicians is criticized for their participation to the sermons.	<i>As always, politicians have taken advantage of a holiday to pose as righteous believers.</i>
Electoral St Mary	16.08.2007	Both politicians and priests are violently criticized.	<i>Yesterdays sermon was a good opportunity to campaign, for the politicians as well as for those who seek to become the new leaders of the Orthodox Church.</i>
Pig Slaughter with Elena Udrea dressed in tights	24.12.2007	Ironical towards the Democrat front-runner, as she attended a Christmas traditional pig slaughter in	<i>Romanias no.1 blonde, equipped with boots and bag branded Louis Vuitton.</i>

		very inappropriate clothing. Also, other episodes involving politicians giving away food to the needy, as a political gesture, not as a Christian one, are presented.	<i>Throwing away money to gain the benevolence of the unemployed.</i>
Biscuits for the children of the heroes in Iraq and Afghanistan	26.12.2007	We are told of the Christmas party organized by the Ministry for Defense, where children of fallen soldiers attended, only to receive modest gifts.	<i>Children were invited to travel to Bucharest, on their parents expense, to a spectacle where they received bags containing juice and biscuits.</i>
The political parties have thrown Easter Eggs at the voters	28.04.2008	Mostly Social Democrats are criticized for “bribing” voters by using lamb chops, Easter eggs and other traditional foods as holiday gifts.	<i>Electoral alms exploded on Easter.</i>
The Democrat Flutur and his Holiness Varsanufie support David’s Lamp, a partnership between PDL and the Patriarchy, for the bringing of the Holy Light from Jerusalem	02.04.2009	Flutur brings the Holy Light from Jerusalem for the second time. The press is again ironic.	<i>The democrat that is in charge of the Holy Business in his party.</i>
Oprescu’s wiener and Flutur’s egg	20.04.2009	A critical view on public attempts by the two politicians to create a public show around the holidays – Oprescu to cook the biggest wiener and Flutur to create a huge festive egg, both aiming to become records.	
Politician’s adventures on Easter, at the seaside and in the mountain	20.04.2009	Again, a critique of electoral behavior on Easter.	<i>All of them were immersed in the mobs, ate eggs with the common people and showed their faces to the people.</i>
An Easter present: sponge-cake and PDL-labeled wine	21.04.2009	Once again, the story of the electoral “bribe”.	
Băsescu goes to the monastery, Udrea to the road from Baltagul and Geoana elects Miss Diaspora	13.08.2009	Ironic towards what politicians do for the holidays.	
Târgu-Jiu: Traian Băsescu took part in the sermon on St Mary’s Day, at	15.08.2009	It is reported for the first time, that the crowds that the president loves, were quite unfriendly.	<i>Although some of the believers welcomed him their arms open, others hissed and</i>

Tismana			<i>booed him, calling him names, such as "thief".</i>
From 376 festivals, Băsescu chooses one that has a "confidential budget"	15.08.2009	Very ironic towards Basescu's participation to a country fair in a county that had supported him a lot in previous elections. County priests also took part.	<i>(...)he turned his back on the high priests to talk to a fan, then he turned around only to make another round of cross symbols with his hand, then whisper something to the lady next to him</i>
Politician's eager devoutness at the Easter sermon	20.04.2009	Again, a critique of electoral behavior on Easter. This time, the royal family is also criticized for campaigning on religious holidays.	
Don't call him president Basescu, call him devout Traian	16.08.2009	The irony in the title is obvious, and relevant for the entire article.	
Cluj: They searched for miracles on St Mary's day	16.08.2009	Once again, politicians participate to holy sermons and they are slightly criticized for it.	The idiom <i>baie de multime</i> (swimming with the crowds) is used, with negative connotations, this time towards prime minister Emil Boc.
Flutur: I thank his Holiness Teoctist	04.04.2010	A political <i>Faux Pas</i> . The former head of the Church, Teoctist, had been dead for 3 years. Gheorghe Flutur mistook his name for that of the current Head of Church, Daniel.	
Easter and politics	05.04.2010	The article is very critical towards the church, in general	<i>It is easy to see that the church has entered a phase of show business. I would say that, slowly but surely, it has taken part in a popularity contest with the politicians. Or, at least, it has borrowed the show-off monkey business part from them.</i>
Enjoying the friendly mob is history!	15.08.2010	For the second year in succession, the president is booed on his public appearance on St Mary's Day. This time it is more serious	

		than in 2009.	
Politicians forget about God	15.08.2010	A review of political participation to religious holidays in the past few years. The journalists notice a decrease in the number of politicians attending sermons. It is assumed that it is because in 2010-2011 there is no election to be won or lost, therefore there is no point to pose as pious believers.	

On the other hand, there are several articles that remain neutral towards politicians and political parties, but there are no positive articles directly connected to politics and religious celebration. Therefore, as the table above shows, trying to benefit from important religious moments to gain political visibility is a very risky communication strategy. Not only does the media tend to have a very violent reaction towards the politicians, but in some cases, the Church's image is the one to suffer from its attacks. There are two motives that the media uses obsessively: *pomana electorala* and *baie de multime*, both with very negative connotations referring to electoral bribe, giving away gifts as a way to buy votes and stooping very low to please the crowds. It would seem as though, slightly contradicting the theoretical model, it is the politicians that have a tendency towards pseudo-events and media spectacle, not the media, which chooses to cover these pseudo-events but also to label them as such.

There are also increasing reports of the believers having negative reactions towards political actors, during these times of celebration. It would appear that most politicians are no longer credible if they associate their image with that of the Church or with that of Christian values. These results confirm hypothesis H2, concerning the negative portrayal of the intertwining between politics and religion in the media.

Another important point to notice, is that the willingness to relate politics with religion is unilateral in most cases. Hence, religious figures and Christian media are more reluctant to intertwine the two areas. Although the Christian journal *Ziarul Lumina* is a paper for the general public, discussing political, social, economical, or health issues; during the religious holidays, the paper is entirely uninvolved in political discussions, focusing on dogmatic and religious issues. There is no current politician even mentioned in connection to the celebrations, and the only times when there is a certain level of political discourse is when communism is mentioned. There are no more than three such articles that condemn communism and name Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu as ruthless dictators in relation to the Church. Also to note is the fact that there are rare interventions from officials of the Orthodox Church in discussions that

regard the affairs of the state. From all of the sample, we can select no more than two situations when officials of the church condemn certain policies: one of these interventions condemns the policy of abortion and warns about the demographic implications, and the second intervention concerns the policies to “estrangle” the area Rosia Montana, where foreign corporations exploit the gold resources to be found. Interestingly enough, there is one politician who sides with the first intervention, thus probably trying to gain appreciation from voters for supporting the Church’s position. Mircea Geoană is the only important politician to officially back the Church on this matter.

To add another essential perspective to the analysis, it was important for the research team to determine whether politician’s statements are reflected by the media. Of course, we focused only on those public statements that concern religion. We considered both the statements that imply a connection to Christian values, without being overtly religious, and the statements that openly discuss church matters and religious matters. Some of the most representative fragments of discourse have been included here, and our findings have been grouped in the form of the following table:

<i>Title</i>	<i>The politician making the statements</i>	<i>Short description</i>	<i>Quotes (abridged and translated)</i>
An electoral Easter with the head of state 9.04.2007	Traian Băsescu	There are allusions to his conflict with the prime minister. The president is reluctant to make peace with him.	<i>In order to be at peace with myself and with God, I cannot be at peace with all my fellow Christians. Those we cannot be at peace with, we must try to change.</i>
Becali wants to cast away the colonels wearing priestly garments from inside the church 15.08.2007	George Becali	The article contains many declarations from Becali, with reference to the fact that some church officials had been discovered to have worked for the Securitate during the communist regime.	<i>This is the last thing we need. A patriarch who could be blackmailed. If he has signed a contract with the devil, then he has no place in the Church.</i>
Religion’s forum at Sibiu 15.08.2007	Adrian Iorgulescu	At that time the minister of culture and cults, Iorgulescu, connects his message to that of inter-confesional understanding, also in direct connection to the topic of EU integration.	<i>(...)this year, which is that of the adherence to the EU, we organize such a manifestation, which demonstrates once more our countries ecumenical tradition and openness, but also the will to promote internal religious dialogue</i>
Basescu – Santa Claus at Cotroceni 23.12.2007	Traian Băsescu	The president talks about his conviction that he will still be in the same official position years from now. It	<i>I am convinced that we will meet again next year, two years from now, and, to some people’s despair, seven years</i>

		is noteworthy that one of the presents he received was a painted religious icon.	<i>from now. Unknown are the ways of the Lord.</i>
Basescu celebrates Easter at Cozia, Tariceanu abroad 29.04.2008	Rovana Plumb	An overview of how politicians spend the holidays. Rovana Plumb was, at the time, a euro-deputy.	<i>Since I was a child, I was taught that there is nothing more precious than being with the loved ones, with one's family, for the holidays.</i>
The Democrat Flutur and his Holiness Varsanufie support David's Lamp, a partnership between PDL and the Patriarchy, for the bringing of the Holy Light from Jerusalem 02.04.2009	Gheorghe Flutur	Flutur brings the Holy Light from Jerusalem for the second time, in cooperation with Church officials. Gheorghe Flutur also describes in the article how important it is for him to be part of the team that brings the Light of Jerusalem.	<i>I asked to be part of the team, and his Holiness approved. I will go with a representative of Suceava Bishopric, and the Patriarchy shall have four representatives.</i>
Basescu at the Ascension ceremony in Miercurea Ciuc 04.04.2009	Traian Băsescu	The president takes part in the official Easter ceremony in an area dominated by an ethnic Hungarian minority. He explains this rather unusual choice. His message is that of unity and understanding, as is the speech that the prime minister also gives in this article.	<i>I came here because I felt that Romanians need to be encouraged and they have to feel the solidarity. I wish for health and joy onto both orthodox, catholic and Jewish citizens.</i>
Raising priest's salary – an Easter present 14.04.2009	Ioan Oltean and other members of the Parliament	The parliament discusses a measure to raise the salaries of priests.	<i>Now, in the week of Passion of the Christ, this measure is one to make justice for priests and it will represent an Easter present.</i>
Becali set free on Good Friday 18.04.2009	George Becali	At the time, the politician had been under arrest for a while. As usual, he gives many statements that have religious connotations, which is part of his regular discourse. It is the most explicit intertwining of political and religious discourse.	<i>May God forgive me when I compare myself publicly to Jesus on the cross, me in jail and the thieves running free. I do not sin when I say that this case is similar to the story of Pilat when he asked the mob whether to put Jesus or Barabas on the cross. Thieves are running free, Becali is on the cross. I pray the Lord to forgive the judges and the prosecutors if they thought that I am guilty.</i>

Of course, apart from the above mentioned articles, there are many others that cite official statements from the part of the president, mostly, that are given with the occasion of the festivities. There are also the usual statements on how politicians spend their time during the holidays, most of them insisting on family values, as these are times that one should spend within the family. We notice the messages that plead forgiveness, ecumenism, faith in the future and so on, but we can also notice examples of negative, aggressive statements with the occasion of religious holidays: politicians who cannot forgive, and extremists that want to clean up the official Church and remove the priests that prove to have been informers for the *Securitate*. Yet the most evident religious-political statement is the last entry in the above table, given by George Becali on his release from prison. In his discourse, there are metaphors and comparisons that turn him into a mythical figure, drawing parallels between the story of Christ's passions and his own.

Therefore, if we are to analyze only a small part of the statements that politicians make during religious holidays, we can confirm the H4 hypothesis that states that the discourse of politicians sometimes touches upon matters of religious interest, be those matters merely Christian values, or be they mythical stories meant to create an aura of holiness around the politician.

Conclusions

The current study proves that there is a clear and present relationship between the three main players in the political debate area – media, politicians and public – during times of religious festivities. Politicians often associate their image with religious contexts, symbols and events, a fact that is visible especially during times of religious celebration. The media is very willing to cover these intertwinements, although that is not entirely to the politician's advantage.

On the matter of the hypotheses tested in the analysis, the results vary as follows:

- H1 - *if a politician is in an important official position, his participation to religious celebrations is more likely to be represented in the media.* This has proved to be only partially confirmed. Had it not been for the case of Călin Popescu Tăriceanu, former prime minister, and one of the generally visible politicians, especially during 2007 and 2008, but a political figure that is associated less often with religious events, we could have concluded that the hypothesis is confirmed. The most prevalent figures represented by the media during times of religious festivities are at the same time, with that exception, the highest ranked officials of the state. The study proves that the president of the state is far more likely

to appear in religious celebration contexts, compared to other high profile politicians.

- H2: *if politicians participate to and use religious contexts for political PR purposes, then this will be reflected negatively by the media.* This hypothesis is fully confirmed, as the analysis presents a great deal of editorials that negatively portray politicians who try to relate to the religious topic. It is seen as a dishonest way to earn votes by awarding Christmas and Easter gifts and by mixing with the mob or by using religious symbols and subjects in their discourse. The media tries to distance itself from the politicians' attempts of manipulating it in order to gain coverage. Pseudo-events are identified as such by the media, making it that newsworthiness is a media resource, rather than a resource for the politicians.
- H3: *the shorter the time between the religious holidays and an election, the more likely it is that the media will focus more on the political figures participation to religious celebrations.* In the sense that during electoral years there should be more media featuring politicians during religious holidays, this hypothesis is not confirmed. 2008, a year of national and local elections is a year that features less media prevalence of politicians in religious context. However, 2010, a year with no electoral stake, is clearly the year with the least politicians involved in religious topics, as portrayed by the media. Yet, this does not represent a trend and the hypothesis cannot be confirmed.
- H4: *political discourse during times of religious holiday touches upon religious topics and Christian values.* The hypothesis is confirmed by the media analysis, as there are various politicians who give statements during religious holidays, statements that are in many cases referenced to Christian values, or even to Church policies. There are also rare, but extreme cases when politicians use comparisons of Biblical situations to refer to ones' self.

Future studies of this phenomenon will be interesting to see, as it is difficult to foresee what the next few years will bring in terms of politics intertwinement with religion. Since our study proves that it is a risky strategy, especially in terms of the media's negative reaction, politicians may take into account the possibility to rely less on public appearances during times of religious holiday. On the other hand, since Romania is facing difficult times in economic and social terms, it is also possible that the population might turn to the last resort of psychological comfort called religion. It remains to be seen if they will be willing to accept politicians into their relationship with God and with the Church.

Notes

- ¹ Marius Ghilezan, *Cum să reușești în viața politică. Manual de campanie electorală* (București: Active Vision, 2000), 97.
- ² Flaviu C. Rus, *Introducere în știința comunicării și a relațiilor publice* (Iași: Institutul European, 2002), 31.
- ³ Robert Denton, Gary C. Woodward, *Political communication in America*, 3rd edition, (New York: Praeger, 1998), 11.
- ⁴ Brian McNair, *An Introduction to Political Communication* (London: Routledge, 2003), 24.
- ⁵ André Gosselin, "La communication politique. Cartographie d'un champ de recherche et d'activités", *HERMÈS*, 17-18, *Communication et politique*, coord. Gilles Gauthier, André Gosselin, Jean Mouchon, (Paris: CNRS Editions, 1995), 17-37.
- ⁶ Dominique Wolton, "Les contradictions de l'espace public médiatisé", *HERMÈS*, 10, *Espaces publics, traditions et communautés*, coord. Jean-Marc Ferry, (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 1992), 95-117.
- ⁷ Bob Franklin, "A bibliographical essay", *Political communication*, 12, (1995): 223-242.
- ⁸ Brian McNair, *Introducere în comunicarea politică*, (Iași: Polirom, 2007), 67.
- ⁹ Ioana Iancu, Delia Balaban, "Religion and Political Communication during Elections in Romania", *Journal for the study of religions and ideologies*, vol. 8 Issue 24 (2009): 151-167
- ¹⁰ Ioana Iancu, Delia Balaban, 151-167.
- ¹¹ Judith Lichtenberg, *Democracy and the Mass Media* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 270.
- ¹² Alison Theaker, *The Public Relations Handbook* (NY: Routledge, 2001), 34
- ¹³ Alison Theaker, 136.
- ¹⁴ Brandon Bruce, *Images of Power*, (Londra: Kogan Page, 1992), 95.
- ¹⁵ D.J. Boorstin, *The Image* (London: Weidenfeld&Nicolson, 1962), 11.
- ¹⁶ Brian McNair, *Introducere în comunicarea politică*, 44.
- ¹⁷ Brian McNair, 44.
- ¹⁸ Brian McNair, 44.
- ¹⁹ Robert Denton, Gary C. Woodward, *Political communication in America* (New York: Praeger, 1998), 47.
- ²⁰ Roger-Gerard Schwartzberg, *Statul spectacol* (București: Scripta, 1995), 9.
- ²¹ Catherine Shaw, *The Campaign Manager. Running and winning local elections*, (Westview Press, 2004), 210.
- ²² Catherine Shaw, 210.
- ²³ The appropriate Romanian term is *spectacularizarea fenomenului politic*
- ²⁴ The appropriate Romanian term is *teatralizare*
- ²⁵ Mihai Coman, *Introducere în sistemul mass-media* (Iași: Polirom, 2007), 164.
- ²⁶ Mihai Coman, 164.
- ²⁷ Paolo Mancini, David Swanson, *Politics, Media and Modern Democracy* (Westport: Praeger, 1996), 16.
- ²⁸ The appropriate Romanian term is *afectizare*
- ²⁹ Robert Entman, *The Media and U.S. Elections: Public Policy and Journalistic Practice* (Bruxelles: Tacis, 1995), 301.

- ³⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Du mensonge à la violence : Essais de politique contemporaine* (Paris: Éditions Calmann-Lévy, 1972), 7.
- ³¹ Barry Richards, *Political Marketing and the Emotional Citizen*, presentation held at the *Elections on the Horizon: Marketing Politics to the Electorate in the USA and UK Conference*
- ³² Sorin Dan Șandor, Marciana Popescu, „Religiosity and values in Romania” *Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences*, 22E (2008): 171-180.
- ³³ Ștefan Bratosin, Mihaela Ionescu, „Church, religion and belief: paradigms for understanding the political phenomenon in post-communist Romania”, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 8 Issue 24 (2009): 3-18.
- ³⁴ Gabriel Bădescu, Mircea Comșa, Dumitru Sandu, Manuela Stănculescu, *Barometrul de Opinie Publică* (Fundatia Soros, octombrie 2007), 28.
- ³⁵ Catherine Shaw, *The Campaign Manager. Running and winning local elections*, (Westview Press, 2004), 210.
- ³⁶ Sorin Tudor, *Politica2.0. Politica marketingului politic* (București: Tritonic, 2007), 82.
- ³⁷ Claudiu Coman, „Modern media innovation in electoral campaigns”, *Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială*, 31 (2010): 45-53.
- ³⁸ Hans Mathias Kepplinger, Johanna Habermeyer, „The Impact of Key Events on the Presentation of Reality”, *European Journal of Communication*, 10/3, (1995): 371-390.
- ³⁹ Denis McQuail, Sven Windhal, *Modele ale comunicării* (București: comunicare.ro, 2001), 147-148
- ⁴⁰ Hans Mathias Kepplinger, „Systemtheoretische Aspekte politischer Kommunikation”, *Publizistik*, 30, (1985): 247-264.
- ⁴¹ An acronym for the institution that monitors the print media in Romania.
- ⁴² In Romanian, the idiom *Baie de multime* cannot be translated. It means to actively pursue meeting crowds of admirers in the streets, shake their hands and enjoy their attention, mostly used for political purposes. The idiom is very often used with reference to Traian Băsescu, and it has a deeply negative connotation.

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