
RELIGIOUS MESSAGES AND SYMBOLS IN THE NEO-POPULIST SPEECH THE BLOGS OF THE 2009 ELECTIONS CANDIDATES

Antonio Momoc*

*University of Bucharest, Faculty of Journalism and Communication Sciences, 1-3 Iuliu Maniu
Bvd., 'Leu' Campus, Building A, 6th floor, 6th district, Bucharest, Romania*

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Abstract

The article will answer the research question: Which of the Romanian populists use religious symbols in their electoral communication? I have built a grid to measure the degree in which the politicians used a populist speech on their blog. In the theoretical part, I made the distinction between populists, neo-populists and cyber-populists. The content analysis of 12 presidential campaign blogs suggested that blogs provided a scene where some populists became cyber-populists, while other populists did not adapt to the new media, preferring to communicate on the traditional media, especially on TV.

Keywords: new media, populism, cyber-populist, presidential campaign

1. Introduction

Ever since Emil Constantinescu asked the question “Do you believe in God, Mr. Iliescu?” in a TV show from the second ballot of the 1996 presidential elections and up to George Becali’s slogan during the 2007 euro-parliamentary elections, ‘Serving the Cross and the Romanian people’, the religious messages and symbols defined the political actors in the electoral campaigns. While Corneliu Vadim Tudor, the leader of the Great Romania Party (GRP), appeared on screen holding the Bible in the second ballot of the 2000 elections, the 2009 Green Party candidate, Remus Cernea, protested online against the presence of religious icons in schools.

The overall task of the article is to point out to which extent do populists use new media to convey either religious symbols, or anti-clerical messages, aiming to mobilize voters to the poll and win votes. In this article I shall use the data also mentioned in another paper [1] that I have identified while monitoring the blogs of the 12 candidates at the 2009 presidential elections. The research shall reveal the measure in which neo-populists have invoked religious topics in the online communication, particularly in the blogosphere.

* E-mail: am@antoniomomoc.ro

2. Theoretical frame

Any political speech can be suspected of being populist discourse and any politician can be accused of populism by the rivals. The following interpretation grid is meant to differentiate a populist speech of a non-populist one. A speech may be considered populist if it includes at least one of the key-features identified by the theoreticians of populism while analyzing the populists' language: invoking the people very often, permanent references to the personal attachment to the people [2]; anti-system position and criticizing the leading elites [2, p. 261]; the People vs. the corrupt elite [3]; rhetoric of the populist leaders is always anti-political [4]; anti-parliamentary attitude [4, p. 24, 37]; anti-party messages, especially in the Central and Eastern Europe countries, where the term 'party' is associated to the Unique/State-Party.

There are some features that can be distinguished in every populist discourse. The various political competitors reach different levels of populism in their speeches. The more typical features can be found in a politician's speech, the more it can be categorized as a populist speech. If a politician resorts to populist elements with a reduced frequency, then his speech will be considered as spontaneously populist.

2.1. Populists

The reference to the people is a constant theme in the populist speech. The logic of people's interpellation – of returning to the people, of legitimating the actions by invoking the popular interest – used by populists is the outcome of their belief that they understand how much people are worth and what people desire. The populist accuses the political system of corruption and the mass-media system of being under the influence of the corrupt elites.

“Populist leaders are charismatic demagogues, redeeming, with paternal and authoritarian accents. They claim to have the key for solving all the problems. Regardless of place of time, what unites them is the anti-system speech, contesting the political, religious or economic institutions.” [3, p. 121] The semi-presidential regime established by the Romanian Constitution assigns extensive attributions to the presidential function. This is why in the collective imaginary the President is often identified with a Saviour able to solve the problems of society. [3, p. 141]

Gino Germani [5], Italian sociologist who emigrated and lived in Argentina, considers that populist movements find their justification in the disequilibrium caused by the transition from a traditional society to a modern one. When the governmental elite fail to mobilize the masses, the political management of this endeavour is undertaken by the populist leaders: the participation degree increases, as populists manage to integrate the social groups with a low socio-political status.

2.1.1. Populists and traditional media

Analyzing the relationship between media and politics, Mihai Coman [6] pointed out the politicians' concern for being visible on media channels: this over-mediatization of political life pushed the political actors to be in a permanent dialogue with the public. Over-mediatization enhances the theatrical side of the political phenomenon, emphasizing the entertainment in the political action, conveying uncomplicated messages and increasing the persuasive dimension of the political communication. This communication turns political life into a non-political spectacle.

One of the most important features of the populist leader is the nature of his relationship with the media [7]. The conflict between the populist leader and 'traditional politics' has its origins in the process of personalization of the political life. The populist leader is well connected to the media. The populist leader claims to be the voice of the people and he does not need the intermediary role of the political class. Thus appears the conflict between the populist leader and the representative institutions of the indirect democracy where she/he is supposed to exercise her/his mandate.

The risk of personalization of politics is the decline of the public institutions and of the parliamentary regime. For example, in Italy the Italian prime-minister and hyper-owner of the Italian mass-media, Silvio Berlusconi, used a slogan against the 'useless Parliament' and, in Romania, Băsescu went for a slogan opposing the Parliament: 'The real majority is you (the people)'.

The role of the traditional media was crucial in the construction of the legitimacy of the populist leader. Especially, but not exclusively, television used to play a traditional role in transforming the political arena into a spectacle.

2.2. Neo-populists

In the age of mass-communication, populism expanded as unidirectional communication from a tribune: a single voice heard by the many either through the radio, or via the TV – classic populists were great public speakers. However, advanced populism cultivates social interaction: a series of voices in dialogue.

Classic and advanced populism (or neo-populism) have some elements in common: calling for the 'People', organizing around a charismatic leader and anti-elitism. S. Miscoiu underlines that „on the one hand, there are not sufficient characteristics to place neo-populism into a discourse register that functions on other principles than populism; on the other hand, there are enough points of difference between classic and advanced populism for neo-populism to be considered the most important stage in the evolution of populism” [8]. Neo-populists criticize the absence of reforms and use popular discontent without promising to purify or save the people. Far from endorsing the emancipation of the 'folks', advanced populism makes more realistic promises: cleaning the political world, reducing taxes, strengthening direct democracy through

referendum, restoring dignity for the elders, supporting the young, judging the corrupt politicians in the people's court [8].

Another feature of the neo-populists is that they prefer to replace the already compromised term 'Party' with 'Movement', which suggests the surpassing of the political-social breaches and the unification of the political forces in the name of the same social and national goals [9].

2.2.1. New-populists and new media (Cyber-populists)

Guy Hermet defines cyber-populism as anti-political and 'postindustrial' futurism emerged at the convergence of a radical party and the citizens' association, combined with the non-governmental organization. [4, p. 338]

In order to attract public attention, they resort to unconventional means: non-violent action, civil disobedience, spectacular politics, spontaneous manifestations, other happenings and even hunger strike. These ways of action "aim to push the public debate to focus on ambitious topics of universal amplitude" [4, p. 339].

Cyber-populists declare that they wish to set up a non-party and their speech is anti-politics. For example, the Italian cyber-populist Beppe Grillo, former comedy actor, founded Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement) based on his blog. New-populists claim that they are censored on the traditional media, that the corrupt elites do not allow them to address to the people and that the only channels where they can freely express are the social media. New-populists describe new media as being independent of the corrupt elites and outside the influence of the circles of interests. Thus, 'techno-populism' [10] is born: the illusion sold to the public to make them believe that users might have the power to amend the corrupt political system through new media.

Hermet asks himself if "radicals truly are populists, since they act in a post-materialist and cosmopolitan style, without being xenophobes and exacerbated nationalists. They surely are, for those who consider their message focused on immediately instituting a participative citizenship as a mandatory exercise for everybody. And even more, from the perspective of other less praiseworthy characteristics: the ascension of their charismatic leader, their anti-political activism and the sectarianism." [4, p. 341]

New-populists propose a "messianic populism of the human rights" [4, p. 347]. Cyber-populists are populists through their rhetoric and elitist through their target-audience. Hermet noticed that "elitist populism is specific for the radical left-wing" [4, p. 342], as opposed to the populism of the radical right-wing, which is deeply religious [4, p. 141].

3. Research method

The qualitative method of content analysis, as explained by Mucchielli [11], implies the following steps: Encoding, Categorization and Establishing the relationships (or Data interpretation). Encoding aims to extract the essential of

the testimony posted on the blog by using the blog post key-words. Any qualitative analysis condenses continuous and abundant data. This means that the key-words or expressions that summarize the phrases of interest must be very accurate and true to the blog testimony. By simply reading the key-words, an uninformed reader should be able to reconstitute the blog testimony without having to read it. For Encoding, the questions we use are ‘What subject do we have here? What is this about?’ The answers to these questions become key-words or summarizing expressions.

The Categorization is illustrated by transposing the key-words into concepts. A category is a word that abstractly defines a cultural, social or psychological phenomenon as it is perceived in a data corpus. The category leads to theoretic concepts, which establish the relationships between the categories. The expression ‘tradition’ is a code. The expression ‘Moral values’, for the same extract is a category. The first expression is extracted from a post on G. Becali’s blog. The second expression is richer, more evocative.

4. Research sample

The official electoral campaign took place between October 23rd and November 21st 2009, so the investigated period on blogs was October and November 2009. The research was conducted on the 12 candidates’ blogs who still have their archives online.

4.1. Research results

The candidate Traian Băsescu was the only one of the candidates who never had a blog. He used a website with web 2.0 interactivity elements, but he deactivated the website immediately after finding out the poll results. Although he did not have a blog, Băsescu was present in online ever since 2004 through the digital guerrilla [12]. In the 2004 presidential campaign, the official electoral video clip presented Băsescu as a ‘Saviour’, playing the role of the exceptional political Character, of the Hero. In the clip the candidate was called ‘The Expected one’ and was shown amidst the crowd, being hugged by the people. “The hero maintains a privileged relationship with the divinity. Just like in the mythology, he is half-god, at the mid-distance between gods and mortals, being assigned by the former amongst the latter.” [13]

Băsescu has never expressed a radically orthodox positioning, “his public function forcing him to be neutral and politically correct. However, the President has manifested his support and confidence in the Romanian Orthodox Church more than once.” [3, p. 152]

In 2009 Băsescu is presented in the electoral video clip as the ship commander who prevents Romania from sinking. The popular referendum he started in 2009 (in the same day with the presidential elections) – having as topics to diminish the number of parliamentarians and to establish the one-chamber Parliament – took place having as motive *the return to the people*.

President Bănescu claimed that the people should be able to decide its political destiny, not a non-legitimate two-chamber Parliament.

Bănescu's campaign developed two populist themes, both invoking the people. The first campaign theme insisted on the idea of majority, having the populist message: 'You are the real majority'. The second campaign theme was that of identifying the enemy with the institution of Parliament. Bănescu profited of the organization of the popular Referendum for the introduction of the one-chamber Parliament and for reducing the number of parliamentarians. The essential message of the candidate was: 'They won't escape of what they are afraid!'

The official online video in 2009 (broadcasted on TV, too) presents Bănescu saying the following electoral message that starts from his 2004 campaign slogan ('You shall live well!'): "I know you still do not live well. We are experiencing an economic crisis that did not start from Romania, but that affects Romania. We shall exit the crisis! The sooner we'll stand together. We'll smoothly pass the storm and we'll accost the ship in a calm harbor, with the entire crew on board!" The slogan written on the billboards that ended this video was 'Bănescu fights for you!'

The clips uploaded on YouTube and the social networks described Bănescu as a politician with populist speech, appealing to religious myths, among which his favourite myth is the Saviour's [14]. Another feature of his neo-populism is his announced intention to form a *Popular Movement*, a coalition among civic organizations and right-wing parties in order to facilitate winning the 2012 elections.

Of the 29 total posts (context units) on Mircea Geoană's blog, the most used key-words (numbering units) were: 4 Boc, 3 'A single Romania', 3 farmers, 3 project, 2 Romanian village, 2 values, 2 despair, 2 T. Bănescu, 2 solutions. Thus, the following themes (recording units) prevailed: 5. Agriculture policy, 4 on criticizing Boc, 3 on criticizing T. Bănescu, 3 on youth, 3 on economic stability recovery, 3 on a single nation, 3 on pensioner, 3 on Romania project, 2 on cultural national values. The campaign slogan – 'We win together!' – addressed to the left-wing electors of the Social-Democratic Party. The message is social [15], but we cannot identify populist features, nor religious symbols in M. Geoană's speech.

The content analysis on Crin Antonescu's blog showed that of the 13 total posts, the most frequently used key-words in his blog posts were: 3 Bănescu, 3 Govern, 2 PNL, 2 Johannis, 2 referendum, 2 technocrats, 2 common-sense, 2 vote, 2 polls, 1 PSD, 1 PD-L, 1 state reform, 1 communism, 1 IMF, 1 Antonescu, 1 Parliament, 1 prime-minister, 1 unicameral, 1 Gheorghe Dinica, 1 change. Therefore, the themes could be identified as: 8 on the PNL Crin Antonescu campaign, 1 on Gh. Dinica, 1 on IMF, 3 on prime-minister, Parliament and Govern. Liberal Antonescu's blog speech was focused on the political reform and less on the economic reform. The campaign slogan, 'The common-sense Romania', was a rational one, not at all populist, and religious

messages were missing. Although the leader of a liberal party, he avoided the topic of the state-church separation.

The Green Party candidate, R. Cernea, had a total of 78 posts on his campaign blog: 25 in October and 53 in November. He was the most online present politician. In the TV shows and in the online uploaded video clip, he was wearing t-shirts with rock bands, never wore a suit, he had a big beard and long hair in a pony tail. The most used key-words: 11 debate, 11 dialogue, 6 candidacy, 5 European Greens, 5 Green Party, 5 signatures, 5 campaign, 4 vote, 4 supporters, 3 democracy, 2 political rights, 2 undemocratic, 2 electoral law system, 2 political class, 2 ecology, 2 environment, 2 religion, 1 state-church separation. Themes: 25 on media coverage, 21 on electoral campaign, 8 electoral system and citizen's rights, 5 Cernea, 5 debate, 5 competitors, 2 environment, 2 Greens, 2 vote, 2 electoral reform, 1 politics in Romania.

The script and video clip were as follows: dressed in a green t-shirt in his video, Cernea was conveying the audience a rational electoral message. "Many people told me to cut my hair and wear a tie. But I am not the politician who talks to you in a suit. 20 years of populist promises are enough! Voting for me means to pass a vote of censure on the irresponsible politicians that brought Romania to crisis. Your vote must be transformed in a weapon defending you future. Support me! For people and for the environment, the exit from the current disaster is the green alternative!"

The Green Party candidate's speech topics were mainly focused on the citizens' equality and on the civic liberties, confiscating the theme of state-church separation. His public statements of him being an atheist and supporting the LGBT community rights got him accused of being 'Satanist'. As President of the Romanian Humanist Association, Cernea spoke against the construction on the People's Salvation Orthodox Cathedral, so he fits into the category of elitist new-populists who are liberal anarchists: his online speech opposes the corrupt political class and the religious institutions. On September 21st 2009, based on the fact that he was not invited on TV shows, he announced he would set himself on fire in front of the public Television. After the elections, he left the Green Party, claiming this organization, which is a member of the European Green Party, is too 'conservatory'.

He set the bases of the *Democratic Agrarian Greens Movement* on his blog with the help of his Facebook fans. Just like the right-wing neo-populists, he gave up the term 'Party' and opted for 'Movement': his radical left-wing project was supported by non-conformist intellectuals, who, in spite of the fact that they do not have anything in common with the peasantry, pretend to be promoting the rural area interests.

The candidate of the New Generation Party (NGP), G. Becali, had a blog with a single post entitled *Why am I a candidate?*, having as theme his campaign motivation. Key-words: 1 religion, 1 tradition, 1 ethics. Invoking the role of orthodoxy in forming the Romanian national identity, Becali promoted the new social order based on Orthodoxy. The name of the New Generation Party reminded of the Young Generation who had joined the Legionary Movement in

the '30s. The spiritual leader of the Generation was philosopher Nae Ionescu and "Orthodoxy", Nae Ionescu believed, "is Romanians' pure form of being religious. [...] To be Romanian, not good Romanian, but simply Romanian, means to be Orthodox. Thus, a Catholic, for example, can be a good Romanian, but not a pure, authentic Romanian. Catholicism or Protestantism is categorically rejected as religious belief that could hold the badge of the Romanian soul." [16]

At the 2004 presidential elections, Becali used the slogan 'I swear to God we will build a Romania like the holy sun in the sky!' Religiousness constitutes the gravity centre of the NGP: "The accent placed on the Romanian-Christian people made the party borrow elements from the interwar extremism register: the 2004 campaign slogan reminded of the Legionary Movement's one. In short, the exaltation of the people and of orthodoxy is the key-element of this messianic populism." [17]

In 2009, he used the slogan 'Faith, hope and love' and he displayed the motto 'I want to make a Romania that God will also like!' on his blog. "In the audience perception, Becali's name is connected with two of the institutions benefiting of the Romanians' constant trust: the Church (through his religious speech) and the Army (through invoking the Army's football club, Steaua Bucuresti)." [3, p. 138]

The symbolic level is revealed through the Christian star with eight corners, the PNG logotype found on the electoral ads and on the campaign blog. "At a certain time, Becali had spoken of changing the football club name into the Christian Star and of playing a religious hymn at the team's games. The party he leads assumed the name 'Christian and Democratic' trying to capitalize at a national level (the customary belief is that anything Christian is good), but also at a European level, as he attempted to join the European political family." [3, p. 141]

"As long as the Romanian people will assume the myth of being Christian people, with a Nation connected to Orthodoxy, the politicians will resort to the religious language. Whether they will show up in church at the ceremonial services, or they will get together with the high level priests, is it important for politicians to be perceived in tight connection with the institution that Romanian trust. If this proximity is obvious for Becali, Bănescu expresses his affiliation in a hazier manner." [3, p. 142]

The candidate of GRP, Vadim Tudor, did not have an official blog in 2009 and did not focus on the online communication, nor on interactivity [18]. In the traditional media, Tudor declared his support for the faithful Christians. Being a good speaker, Vadim Tudor's discourse mixed symbols inspired from the national-communist rhetoric and from the interwar radical movements. His political style borrowed elements of anti-Semite rhetoric, being xenophobe and violent. [16, p. 105]. In his messages, he tried to synthesize the nationalist-ethnic myths of the communist rhetoric in the late '80s. His 2009 slogan was 'Save Romania! S.O.S. The Romanian People!' At the 2012 local elections, Vadim

Tudor and G. Becali promoted themselves together in an alliance marked by the slogan ‘Two Christians and patriots will save the country from thieves’.

5. Conclusions

As part of a wider research regarding the new media and neo-populism relationship, this article establishes which of the 2009 presidential elections candidates used a populist speech in their online communication. A particularity of the Romanian populism is turning politics into something holy and resorting to myths and religious symbols. I have noticed that radical right-wing populists prefer the oral communication via traditional media, particularly audio-visually, ignoring internet, while neo-populists successfully express via new media.

T. Băsescu is a moderate right-wing neo-populist, who inserts religious nuances and references in his discourse. He communicated in the cyber-space during the electoral campaigns, choosing the traditional media communication in the rest of the time. Extending the analysis to the electoral video clips that circulated online and were posted on his campaign blog, the references to ‘the people’ are constant in President Băsescu’s speech. He presented himself as being the voice of the people and positioned above the interests of the politicians, who made a fortune on the expense of the common people. The President fought in the name of the people as a Saviour of the nation.

“Secularized messianism has been expressed in history. If the prophet is God’s interpreter, Messiah is God’s delegate to free people from pain and to set up His Kingdom on Earth. Messianism is a renewal and a way of ensuring salvation in the other world or on Earth. It has direct connections not only with a people’s suffering, but also with its destiny. Religious aspiration is not independent from the place, culture, history, or the social-economic status of a people. In fact, the messianic territory is a prerequisite of charismatic messianism that incarnates in an exceptional human being. Messiah is a Saviour.” [2, p. 242-243]

Remus Cernea is of the cyber-populist kind of neo-populist. His message is anti-institutional, against the Romanian Orthodox Church: he assumed the secularist speech about the state-church separation that Antonescu, president of the Liberal Party (PNL), refused. The PNL leader preferred a discourse with social and nationalist accents. Just like Băsescu, Cernea used the neo-populist unifying concept ‘Movement’, as opposed to the term ‘Party’.

Cernea pleaded less on returning to the people, but his elitist messages were aiming against the political class and system. His message was anti-political and, along with his *Democratic Agrarian Movement*, he positioned as an alternative to the established politicians. He is a radical left-wing neo-populist with anti-clerical messages.

The main result of the research is that, while radical right-wing populists G. Becali and C.V. Tudor invoked religious messages and symbols such as ‘salvation’, ‘cross’, ‘faith’ on traditional media, the radical left-wing neo-populists posted online messages against the presence of religious symbols in the

public space. Neo-populists like Bănescu, from the moderate right-wing, resorted to the people, pleaded against the parliamentary system and conveyed support messages for Romanian Orthodox Church.

The sanctifying populist discourse of the radical right-wing is in opposition with the secularized neo-populist speech of the radical left-wing. The structure, rhetoric and the populist features of the discourse are similar, but the meaning and orientation are either charged with religious symbols (right-wing), or criticize the religious symbols and institutions (left-wing).

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