

**POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP.  
THEORETICAL PRELIMINARIES FOR AN APPROACH  
OF THE LEADERSHIP PERSONALIZATION**

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**Abstract.** *The paper aims to examine the main theoretical contribution on the personalization of policy in general and of leaders in particular, as a preliminary operation in a research that pursues the personalization of political leadership of Romania and the presidentialization of the executive decision making process. It assumes the general thesis that the leadership and party personalization and presidentialization is the basic characteristics of the presidentialization of politics and executive power and that in the new democracies of Europe, including Romania, presidentialization has had great implications on the nature and quality of politics. As such, the paper comprises specifications concerning the role of media communication in personalizing the politicians and the political leadership, and some of the main trends of defining and analysing the current process of the personalization of politics.*

**Keywords:** *political leadership, personalization of mediated political communication, personalization of party leadership.*

*Media Communication and Political Leadership*

The assertion that has marked most poignantly in the recent years the literature on the political communication transformation and its implications in the contemporary politics was that formulated by McAllister in 2007: “There is little doubt that politics has become more personalized over the past half-century”<sup>1</sup>. The conclusion on the character increasingly personalized of the politics summarized a series of views on this trend not only in the presidential systems – “the traditional institutional home”<sup>2</sup> of the personalization of politics –, but also across almost

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<sup>1</sup> Ian McAllister, “The Personalization of Politics”, *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior*, Edited by Russell J. Dalton and Hans-Dieter Klingemann, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007, p. 571. In the end of his article McAllister considered that: “the personalization of politics will remain a – and perhaps *the* – central feature of democratic politics in the twenty-first century” (p. 585).

<sup>2</sup> Starting precisely from this “traditional institutional home” of the processes of personalization of presidential election and presidentialization of executive decision-making, in a recent study on the development of French

all of the major parliamentary systems<sup>3</sup>. The theme was not new<sup>4</sup> since in 1971 Brian Farell ascertained also for almost all political systems “the personification” of the executive domination in a single leader as a central fact of political life<sup>5</sup>. But what McAllister emphasized, as Poguntke and Webb did in 2005<sup>6</sup> and afterwards in 2011, was that “this logic” “is now coming increasingly to apply to all types of regime” and that the perceptions of the personalization, and even the “presidentialization” of politics have become more widespread<sup>7</sup>.

McAllister’s statement has aimed the period of time during which in all of the liberal democracies the leaders have become more important and have gained consistently stronger recognition as a result of “a complex and multi-causal process” in which the involvement of electronic media is seen as crucial for the mode in which the government and the leaders communicate with voters, in which try to convince them, and in which the “party leaders exploit their exposure in the electronic media”<sup>8</sup>. His point of reference concerning a leader surpassing the popularity of his party, previous to Margaret Thatcher (1979) and Ronald

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executive these processes are reunited under the generic term “Americanization”. See Cristina Bucur and Robert Elgie, “The development of French executive: Endogenous Americanization”, *French Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 2012, pp. 389-402.

<sup>3</sup> McAllister ordered the literature on the trend towards the personalization of politics in the parliamentary systems according to what he called “various labels” of it, namely the “presidentialization of politics” – Anthony Mughan, “Party leaders and presidentialism in the 1992 British election: a postwar perspective”, in *British Elections and Parties Yearbook, 1993*, Edited by D. Denver et al., Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, 1993, pp. 193-204; Anthony Mughan. *Media and the Presidentialization of Parliamentary Elections*. Palgrave, London, 2000; Thomas Poguntke and Paul Webb, “The Presidentialization of Politics in Democratic Societies: A Framework for Analysis”, in Thomas Poguntke and Paul Webb (editors), *The Presidentialization of Politics. A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005, pp. 1-26 – “institutional presidentialisation of parliamentary systems” – Bart Maddens and Stefan Fiers, “The direct PM election and the institutional presidentialisation of parliamentary systems”, *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 2004, pp. 769-793 – “presidential parliamentarism” – Reuven Hazan, “Presidential parliamentarism: direct popular election of the prime minister”, *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 1996, pp. 21-38. In what follows I will not consider the personalization of politics and the presidentialization of politics as being interchangeable. I will use the term personalization to denote the focusing of the political communication, the electoral process, and the politics in general, on the leaders and leadership, and the term presidentialization to denote leaders’ control of their parties and their intra-party and executive autonomy, meaning generically the concentration of power around leaders in the democratic political systems.

<sup>4</sup> Lauri Karvonen show in this regard that the phenomenon of the personalization was much more prominent in the pre-democratic forms of politics than it is today, but that now it is related to the transformation and weakening of some fundamental social structures, political parties and in general political affiliation and ideological identification, and to the appearance of some forces, “other than collective loyalties and identities, that have increasingly come to condition the political behavior and preferences of citizens.” According to Karvonen, one of this forces, which expresses “the gist of the personalization thesis”, is “the role of individual politicians and of politicians as individuals in determining how people view politics and how they express their political preferences”. Lauri Karvonen, “The Personalization of Politics. What does research tell us so far, and what further research is in order”, 4<sup>th</sup> ECPR Conference, Pisa 6-8 September 2007, [web.iaincirebon.ac.id/.../PoliticsMatters/personalisasi%20politik\\_paper](http://web.iaincirebon.ac.id/.../PoliticsMatters/personalisasi%20politik_paper).

<sup>5</sup> Brian Farell, *Chairman or Chief? The Role of the Taoiseach in Irish Government*, Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1971, p. X.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Poguntke, Paul Webb, “The Presidentialization of Politics in Democratic Societies: A Framework for Analysis”, in *The Presidentialization of Politics. A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*, Edited by Thomas Poguntke and Paul Webb, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005, pp. 1-26.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Webb, Thomas Poguntke, Robin Kolodny, “The Presidentialization of Party Leadership? Evaluating Party Leadership and Party Government in the Democratic World”, *Comparative Political Leadership*, Edited by Rudger Helms, Palgrave Macmillan, London, New York, 2012, p. 77.

<sup>8</sup> Ian McAllister, “The Personalization of Politics”, *op. cit.*, p. 572.

Reagan (1980), was the Canadian Pierre Trudeau, selected as prime minister in 1968, who has eclipsed the profile of his party and inspired the “Trudeaumania”. This illustration of a leader personalization took place in what the specialists in political communication named, mainly with reference to United Kingdom, “the Wilsonian era”<sup>9</sup> or the “modern” era of electoral campaigns, in which the elections have been dominated by the television and in which the ample implications generated by this technological innovation were manifested in terms of citizens’ access to information, increasing competition in the media field, parties’ “heavy” investment in opinion polling in order to find out the groups of “target” voters wanted of parties, market research and advertising<sup>10</sup>. The current era, “the Mandelsonian”<sup>11</sup> one or that of “the post-modern” election campaigns, whose beginning is conventionally considered the year 1997, is dominated by an increasingly “professional” approach to election campaigning, the utilizing of the advertising agency, the application of the marketing paradigm, the focusing on image more than on the substance of message, under the conditions of some “new levels of sophistication” in the technology of political communications “in order to monitor the campaign and provide instant expert advice on issues as diverse as election law, economics, social policy and defence”<sup>12</sup>.

As such, the thesis comprehensively sustained in this respect is that the growing role of the television and electronic media and the evolution within the communication field are one of the main causes of the personalization of politics, essentially manifested in the electoral process – which becomes “decisively moulded by the personalities of the leading candidates”<sup>13</sup> –, and also of the presidentialization – party and executive presidentialization – in the parliamentary and semi-presidential systems<sup>14</sup>. The other interrelated cause of the politics centred on candidate and on leader is “the weakening of traditional affective ties between voters and parties” or the weakening of the partisan loyalties, namely the ideological, political or “party” ties. With regard to this cause, there is to be specified that the structural changing of mass communication – which,

<sup>9</sup> Named after Harold Wilson, elected prime minister of Great Britain in 1964, since the political communication of the age “became associated with an ‘instinctive, self-reliant’ or ‘seat of their pants’ style of campaigning exemplified by Wilson”. John Bartle and Dylan Griffiths, “Introduction”, *Political Communications Transformed. From Morrison to Mandelson*, Edited by John Bartle and Dylan Griffiths, Palgrave, Basingstoke, Hampshire, and New York, 2001, p. 7. According to Bartle’s and Griffiths’ periodization, the “Wilsonian era” stands out as the period in which “the parties responded to the growing importance of television by initiating daily morning conferences in order to ensure that their favored issues and their interpretations of news dominated the media’s agenda” (p. 7).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>11</sup> Named after Peter Mandelson, one of the main advisors of the Labour Party in the general election on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1997 in which the Labors won “a massive majority”, and the labour leader Tony Blair “crushed John Major’s tired-out Tories in spectacular style”, as headlined *The Sun*, as a result of an unprecedented campaign, performed from a change of perspective, a “strategic integration” of some specific innovation. See in this respect John Bartle and Dylan Griffiths, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-11; Adrian Beard, *The Language of Politics*, Routledge. Taylor & Francis Group, London, New York, 2000, pp. 57-95.

<sup>12</sup> John Bartle and Dylan Griffiths, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Poguntke, Paul Webb, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> See in this regard Dieter Ohr, “Changing Patterns in Political Communication”, in vol. *Political Leaders and Democratic Elections*, edited by Kees Aarts, André Blais and Hermann Schmitt, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, p. 14.

according to Poguntke and Webb, has altered its nature –, and the widespread privatization of television – which further amplified this changing –, have constituted the context in which the television focused on personalities or leaders rather than party programs. The aim was to simplify the political issues by using the politicians' tendency to concentrate themselves on symbolism and details rather than on "substance." Poguntke and Webb underlined in this respect a double conditioning, namely: the politicians-tendency to adapt themselves to the logic and the format of media and their tendency to exploit their "mediatization" in order to bypass other executive actors in setting their own political agendas or in creating a "considerable leeway in tilting policymaking in certain directions"<sup>15</sup>. As such, this focalization on leaders and leadership contributes to the perception of leaders as being more concerned about the problems than the party in general (either more moderately or extremely concerned on a particular issue than the party), to the orientation of the vote after leaders' own personal views on some issues or after the personal qualities of the leader. Therefore, to a certain degree, "the mediatization" and personalization of leadership contributes to "the party dealignment", to the weakening of the party identification and of the loyalty towards party. Certainly, this "erosion" of the traditional link between the mass party and their basis of social support has been analysed in the literature of the "end of ideology" at the early 1960s and in the works of electoral sociologists in the 1990s<sup>16</sup>, but since then the cross-national study on the organizational linkage between parties and the masses have revealed the weakening of the organizational connections to their core constituencies both in substance and in overall scope, especially in terms of party membership. This weakening of the "social anchorage of the party" is concomitant with an increased pluralization of its social basis and with a loosening of the social group ideology. In the conditions in which the social group identities are no more transposed in voter loyalties and the political competition is no more based on the sharp ideological conflicts (of class-linked, ethnic or denominational type), the qualities of the leaders become more important for the conduct of election campaigns, as Poguntke and Webb point out, "if voters become-available – as a result of loosening social ties and clear programmatic alternatives are increasingly lacking, party politicians may take refuge in a growing leadership centredness of politics"<sup>17</sup>.

### *Leadership Personalization – Markers of the Current Theoretical Debate*

As such, the leadership personalization can be defined as a process whereby the leaders become more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identities<sup>18</sup> and which entails the institutions (electoral systems, nomination

<sup>15</sup> Blais, André, "Political Leaders and Democratic Elections", in vol. *Political Leaders and Democratic Elections*, ed. cit., p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> As Poguntke and Webb remind in their referential study "The Presidentialization of Politics in Democratic Societies: A Framework for Analysis", ed. cit., p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> See Lauri Karvonen, *loc. cit.*, p. 2.

rules and the position and powers of individual representatives and office-holders) which stress individual politicians over collectivities more; electoral campaigns and political propaganda which are centered increasingly on individual candidates and leaders instead of parties, platforms and collective interests; an increased public *perception* of politics as a competition between individual politicians and leaders rather than organized collective interests<sup>19</sup>; an increased formation of public political *preferences* on the basis of people images of individual political actors; an increased making of people political *choices* based on preferences formed on the basis of their evaluations of individual politicians; the possibility as the choices citizens make on the basis of their evaluations of individual candidates and leaders to decide *the outcome of elections*; the possibility as the *power relationships* in political and society to come to be decided on the basis of the individual characteristics of politicians<sup>20</sup>.

As it is formulated in another very precise and comprehensive synthesizing, the concept of personalization express a relation between the behavior of voters, political actors and the media, a relation wherein *the voters* may increasingly make their electoral choices based on leaders or candidates, *the politicians* may behave more as individual actors and less as members of a party, *the parties* may put their leader at the center of their communication, and *the media* may represent politics as a confrontation more of individuals than of collectivities<sup>21</sup>. Consequently, as showed the mentioned authors, the personalization has become a central concept in the discussions on how political news and election coverage have changed over time from parties and organizations to candidates and leaders and on how the individual politicians are increasingly portrayed as private persons. Although the empirical evidences in these respects across the western democracies have not been categorical confirmed, being more precisely interpreted either as “somewhat mixed” (Karvonen), or not quite relevant (Kriesi), according to Poguntke and Webb they are to be interpreted as illustrating a substantial part of the structural changes which has resulted from long-term. In addition, Aelst, Sheafer and Stanyer sustain that in order to avoid the lack of conceptual clarity and the absence of common operationalizations which generated unclear or conflicting conclusions about the personalization of politics is necessary another model of operationalization for comprehending the personalization of political news based on a review of relevant studies. In this comprehending model the mentioned authors made a useful distinction between the personalization at the

<sup>19</sup> In this respect is particularly significant the quote from Amaury de Riencourt choose by Webb, Poguntke and Kolodny as motto of their paper: “With Caesarism and Civilization, the great struggles between political parties are no longer concerned with principles, programs and ideologies, but with men. Marius, Sulla, Cato, Brutus still fought for principles. But now, everything became personalized. Under Augustus, parties still existed, but there were no more Optimates or Populares. No more conservatives or democrats. Men campaigned for or against Tiberius or Drusus or Caius Caesar. No one believed any more in the efficacy of ideas, political panaceas, doctrines, or systems, just as the Greeks had given up building great philosophic systems generations before. Abstractions, ideas, and philosophies were rejected to the periphery of their lives...”

<sup>20</sup> See this synthesizing in Lauri Karvonen, *loc. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>21</sup> See Peter Van Aelst, Tamir Sheafer, James Stanyer, “The personalization of mediated political communication: A review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings”, *Journalism*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2012, p. 204.

expense of parties – or “the shift in media visibility from parties to individual politicians, or from government to individual cabinet members” – and the personalization as the shifting boundaries between the public and the private – or “the shift in media focus from the politician as occupier of a public role to the politician as a private individual, as a person distinct from their public role.”<sup>22</sup> The operationalization of this distinction has generated two dimensions of the personalization: *individualization* – as a shift from parties to politicians (“politicians versus institutions”) – and *privatization* – as a shift from the public to the personal (“politician as role occupant versus politician as private individual”) –, and four sub-dimensions of it: *general visibility*, focused on the shifts to individual politicians, *concentrated visibility*, focused on the shifts to leaders, *personal characteristics*, focused on the shifts to non-political traits, and *personal life*, focused on the shifts to private life and personal interests.

Certainly, an analysis following this coordinates it must take into account the nature and the variations of the institutional arrangements of the political system, which in turn have important effects on the nature and style of political leadership. Thus, the presidential system, in which “the executive is responsible to the electorate” since the president is popularly elected by means of direct election, generally encourages individual responsibility, and, as McAllister specified, the party discipline is often weak since president’s political survival does not depend on the parliamentary majority and of the unity of the governing party. Instead, in the parliamentary systems, both in the systems that have coalition arrangements, “a pattern that is found throughout Europe”, and in those with the majoritarian arrangements, a pattern “in the Westminster tradition”, is encouraged the collective responsibility, since the executive is both dependent upon the confidence of the members of legislature and accountable to them. In addition, in the system with parliamentary arrangements, is encouraged the party government, so that the party discipline is a primary factor in maintaining executive authority, and the parties frequently go to considerable lengths to retain the loyalty of their elected members, since these are the attributes on which their political survival rests<sup>23</sup>. Whereas in the presidential systems the presidents have a greater flexibility in formulating and implementing policy – the retaining office being not normally dependent upon the day-to-day confidence of the legislature –, in the parliamentary ones, in which the survival of the executive depends upon the confidence of the legislature, the prime minister must make it a priority to more carefully refine his or her performance in office and to retain the confidence of his or her party colleagues. Accordingly, it is obvious that the presidents in the presidential systems have much greater executive authority and more autonomy in their ability to shape policy than the prime ministerial counterparts and the presidents in the parliamentary and semi-presidential systems. According to McAllister, beyond the effects which can be attributed to specific personalities, “there is

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 205.

<sup>23</sup> See Ian McAllister, “The Personalization of Politics”, *op. cit.*, p. 576. He summarizes in this regard well-known authors in the field: Richard S. Katz, David Farrell, Shaun Bowler.

clear evidence that the post-war operation of parliamentary systems has moved closer to this presidential model.” This means that, in comparison with the interwar period, many post-war British prime ministers have accumulated considerably greater power and authority and, in majoritarian parliamentary systems, the prime ministers can exercise unprecedented power in shaping ministerial careers – a crucial tool in ensuring compliance and centralizing authority<sup>24</sup>. What McAllister emphasized, and what is particularly important for the type of political system to which Romania is circumscribed, is the fact that the new (semi-presidential) democracies of Central and Eastern Europe represent a special case in the role of political institutions in shaping political leadership.

Generically, the semi-presidential systems provide a dual structure of executive authority: the president, and the prime minister and government as authority which ensures the implementation of the domestic and foreign policy of the country, and exercises the general management of public administration. In the category of semi-presidential in which Romania is part, between the “dual executive” and parliament existing three types of formal institutional relationships: (1) a hierarchical “vertical relationship” between parliament and government, the government being responsible towards the Parliament (because the prime minister and the government have their origin and “survival fused with the assembly majority”<sup>25</sup>, (2) a hierarchical “diagonal” relationship between president and government by virtue of president’s right to have some initiative in the prime ministerial nomination, and concomitantly (3) a “transactional” relationship between the president and the government, because the government, once appointed, does not depend on president but on the parliamentary confidence, so that the president and the government are “co-equals” because they have different sources of authority and must cooperate to accomplish some task (“horizontal juxtaposition of co-equals” or *inter pares* of the Executive)<sup>26</sup>. Certainly, this arrangement is possible since the president and the parliament have each “an autonomous source of legitimacy.” This pattern of authority, classified by Maurice Duverger yet since 1992 in the category of the semi-presidential political regimes<sup>27</sup>, is considered by Matthew S. Shugart as being of *premier-presidential* type<sup>28</sup>, and by Giovanni Sartori, as being a “weak”, “rationalized” or of “parliamentary” type<sup>29</sup>. In fact, in Romania’s case the president is placed in the political game not in a position of *pares* (“co-equal”) but in that of *supra partes*, and this removes him from the “active” role of “player” or of part in the act of governing. Moreover, according to the Constitution of Romania, the elected President is not

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>25</sup> Matthew S. Shugart, *Semi-Presidential Systems: Dual Executive and Mixed Authority Patterns*, Draft, 2005, p. 3, <http://dss.ucsd.edu/~mshugart/workingpapers.html>.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>27</sup> Maurice Duverger, “Régime semi-présidentiel”, in Olivier Duhamel, Yves Mény (Eds.), *Dictionnaire constitutionnel*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris, 1992, p. 902.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew S. Shugart, *loc. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> Giovanni Sartori, “Despre sistemul constituțional românesc”, in Giovanni Sartori, *Ingenieria constituțională comparată. Structuri, stimulente și rezultate*, Trans. by Gabriela Tănăsescu and Irina Mihaela Stoica. Institutul European, Jassy, 2008, p. 313, p. 316.

established as chief of the Executive or as chief of the State. This “division of power”, in which “neither the president nor the prime minister is in a dominant position”<sup>30</sup>, but in which the parliament has an important role, falls within a pattern “shaped in presidential scenery but within a parliamentary logic,” a pattern within “the elected president never even tries to take part in every day governing,” since the governing “entirely belongs to government which is exclusively accountable to parliament”<sup>31</sup>.

McAllister recalled about this kind of political practice functioning arrangement that the autocratic nature of the old communist regimes has been a legacy that many have found difficult to leave behind, and that the political instability and economic stress have combined to influence many voters to seek a “strong leader” to overcome their problems<sup>32</sup>. And, of course, indicated in this regard Russia’s case, within Vladimir Putin has exploited this widespread popular desire in order to centralize political authority. At the same time he showed that, across most of the post-communist societies, the presidential or parliamentary institutional arrangements “often matter less than particular individuals and the constellation of issues that shape political conflict,” but that the empirical evidences have concluded that in twenty-two post-communist societies the presidential systems with stronger executive powers have fared worse in democratic performance compared to either parliamentary systems or presidential systems with weak executive powers. In these cases the personalization of leaders and leadership by media concentration on the personalities of the political leaders can play a key role in the process of the party personalization and presidentialization and of the presidentialization of the executive decision-making process.

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<sup>30</sup> Robert Elgie, “Semi-Presidentialism and Comparative Institutional Engineering”, in Robert Elgie (Ed.), *Semipresidentialism in Europe*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004, p. 290.

<sup>31</sup> Bartłomiej Nowotarski, “How to Build new Democracies and Protect Them against Erosion. What Can Really Mean the Recent Worldwide Transitional Experiences for a New Post-revolutionary Countries?”, 2013, p. 4, [www.ue.wroc.pl/~nowotarski/how\\_to\\_build\\_n](http://www.ue.wroc.pl/~nowotarski/how_to_build_n)

<sup>32</sup> Ian McAllister, *op. cit.*

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