Unconventional Political Campaigns in Romania:

Presidential Impeachment Referendum (2007)

Senior Lecturer Camelia M. Cmeciu, PhD
"Danubius" University of Galaţi, Romania
cmeciu.camelia@univ-danubius.ro

Senior Lecturer Monica P. Pătruţ, PhD
"Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, Romania
monicapatrut@yahoo.com

Abstract: Every referendum brings forth a crisis of legitimacy. Traian Băsescu experienced this political situation in 2007 when he was suspended by the Romanian Parliament. Having as theoretical background social semiotics (Kress, van Leeuwen [1996] 2006; van Leeuwen, 2005), our paper focuses on four semiotic systems (represented participants, composition, multimodality, interactive participants) applied to the images produced by the Romanian citizens, who had been "called up" to an unconventional political campaign through a personal production of a digital guerilla. Beyond its mere iconic function, number "322" has an indexical function of pinpointing the MPs who voted for Traian Băsescu's impeachment. This number constitutes the main reason for the embodiment of these Romanian MPs in pictorial metaphors. Metaphors activate the semiotic system of multimodality because they become a sign of creativity by combining layers belonging to different iconic isotopic clusters. The humour comes from the allotopies (Greimas 1966) created through the surprising interweaving of politicians and animals, fairy-tales characters or evil/ good heroes.

Keywords: Traian Băsescu, 322 MPs, voters, digital guerilla, pictorial metaphors.

"The art of governing" (McLean [1996] 2001: 339) and "the art of playing" (Beard 2000: 3) have been two definitions provided to politics throughout centuries. This twofold perspective is assigned by Niccolo Machiavelli in his famous book *The Prince* ([1513] 1998) and by Roger-Gérard Schwartzenberg in his book *L' État spectacle*: *essai sur et contre le star system en politique*. On the one hand, the Machiavellian perspective on the art of governing relies on the fox discovering the snares and the lion terrifying the wolves. On the other hand, according to Schwartzenberg:

A long time ago, politics involved ideas. Nowadays, politics means persons. Or rather, characters. It seems that each leader will pick up a position and he chooses a role. Just as if for a show. (…) So, politics turns into a script. Each leader will display his qualities and he will act as if he were a star. Thus there starts the personalization of power. This concept relies on the Latin word persona, which means theatre mask. (Schwartzenberg [1977] 1995: 6; translated into English by – C.M.C.)

If we consider the definition of humour, provided by Rod Martin (2007: 83) in his book *Psychology of Humour*, "a form of play, comprising a social context, a cognitive process and an emotional response expressed through laughter", we might draw a link between politics and humour. But in politics, the playful state of the mind has a telic mode[1], being goal-oriented, especially during election campaigns through the strategies of downplaying the candidates.

In Romania, the persuasive form of intensifying the opponents' weak point by metaphorically representing him/ her as animals was used in:

- 2000 – the National Liberal Party was accused by the Romanian Democratic Convention 2000 ("Which is the political color of NLP – a chameleon = a reptile which takes the colour of the object it lies on"); the Democratic Party

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[1] According to Radden and Dirven (2007: 180), "[a] bounded telic event takes a certain duration for its completion. It requires an energy source, typically an intentionally acting human being, that propels the event to its conclusion".

embodied the Social Democratic leader, Ion Iliescu, as "The Granny" (*Bunicuţa*), the pictorial combination of the wolf, the granny and the girl from the well-known fairy-tale *Little Red Riding Hood* (Cmeciu 2006).

- 2004 – the Justice and Truth Alliance pictured its opponents as mosquitoes, mice, worms and moths building their habitat within the borders of the Romanian map.

1.   The script of a referendum campaign

The examples mentioned above prove that election campaigns lie on verbal and pictorial aggressive humour that makes fun at politicians and which is associated to satire (Martin 2007: 13). Unlike election campaigns, referendum campaigns seem to reach the highest degree of aggressiveness, especially when the issue, that voters have to take into account, is targeted on forcing the president to step down.

Starting from Lawrence LeDuc's framework on referendum campaigns (2002) and from the representation of participants in social semiotics (Kress, van Leeuwen [1996] 2006), we will analyse the narrative beyond the Presidential Impeachment Referendum that took place in Romania in April-May 2007. Every narrative discourse (Boje 2001: 97) implies a causal and a chronological development of events and referendums follow this sequence, namely they usually represent the consequence of "a conscious political decision taken by a party, organization or group" (LeDuc 2002: 148).

In the case of the Presidential Impeachment Referendum in Romania, the script was represented through four participants who could be analysed in terms of the theory of thematic roles[2], since being a participant in a drama implies playing a role (Aarts [1997] 2001: 94):

- the explicit agents (the initiators) – the 322 politicians (Democratic Social Party, Liberal National Party, Great Romania Party, Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania) from the Romanian Parliament, who voted an impeachment proposal against Traian Băsescu, the President of Romania. The implicit agent (the legislator) – the Constitutional Court of Romania, which acknowledged the Parliament's vote.

- the patient (the sufferer) – Traian Băsescu (Democratic Party) - the first president who has been officially suspended in the history of Romania.

- the (non) benefactive – the voters who had a twofold mission: (not) to participate in the voting process and to inform themselves on the true causes that led to this referendum.

Referendums rely on issues, but in the case of the Romanian referendum, these issues actually had a sensitive nature since they were directed on the charges[2] brought against the President of Romania:

- infringing upon and "substituting the authority" of the government, the judicial system and the Parliament;

- committing acts of "political partisanship" with direct reference to the Democratic Party, abuse of power and acting more like a "judge of the other public authorities" than a "collaborator", thus "abandoning his role of impartial mediator required by the Romanian constitution";

- manipulating and "instigating public opinion against other state institutions" such as the Parliament and the government.

The charges brought against Traian Băsescu shook not only the core beliefs of the MPs, but also the citizens' beliefs. Thus within their conceptual map, there had been noticed a shift from stability towards volatility (LeDuc 2002: 147) since Traian Băsescu used the new media for the second time, after the 2004 presidential election campaign, as the main source

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[2] The theory on thematic roles has its origins in Charles Fillmore's case grammar (1968), a linguistic theory that combined the syntactic knowledge (syntactic categories, without making reference to their meaning) and the semantic knowledge (the properties of a word's referent).
[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanian_presidential_impeachment_referendum,_2007

of information for the Romanian citizens. These two unconventional political campaigns (2004 and 2007) prove that Romania seems to adapt itself to the development of Web 2.0 and to take advantage of the optimism that the new internet-based media generated about "the social and participatory-democratic potentialities of these media" (Carpentier 2009: 407).

1.1. The unconventionality beyond the Presidential Impeachment Referendum Campaign in 2007

Within the situational embedding of the 2007 referendum, the Romanian voters had a twofold participation as interactive participants:

- on the one hand, they put into practice their constitutional right to vote. This generic role to vote means that the legitimacy of the patient's/ politician's existence/ power totally depends on the agent's/ voter's power (Cmeciu 2005: 101). Unlike the election campaigns, when this action is often implicitly rendered by all the candidates, during referendum campaigns it "feeds" on explicit statements.

- on the other hand, they turned into social guerilla fighters as the referendum campaign was structured on the unconventional idea of a reloaded digital guerilla (www.basescu.ro). Through their pictorial works, the Romanians could prove their online active involvement. Thus, the internet was used not just as a mere cue of information as campaign pamphlets, newspapers, television editorials, ads or direct mailings are, because the sender (Băsescu and his campaign staff – the GMP advertising and PR agency) did not have a complete control on the discursive content and structure.

The citizens' perception developed over the course of this referendum campaign meant a breakthrough within their active role. This impact could be rendered through a quantitative analysis at three layers:

- *the creative way of involving*. There were received 1,100 pictorial works, out of which 106 were posted on www.basescu.ro and 44 had as their topic the number 322, the index of the MPs who voted against Băsescu.

- *the change of the citizens' attitude* regarding their active involvement is obvious during the one-month referendum campaign (April-May 2007). The web traffic[3] is also a means of evaluating the impact of this referendum campaign:

Month	Visitors	Posts	Growth
January 2007	5.516	25.591	+41.9%
February 2007	5.112	21.766	-7.3%
March 2007	4.255	18.565	-16.8%
April 2007	**80.534**	**370.678**	**+1.792.7%**
May 2007	**247.601**	**1.994.311**	**+207.4%**
June 2007	16.099	88.127	-93.5%

- the change of the citizens' behaviour. The presence to vote was relatively high (44.5%), even if Bogdan Teodorescu and Leonard Sultănescu (2007: 115) are of the opinion that it should have been higher since the issue at stake was important for the future and that all the surveys had estimated a higher participation. 74.48% voted "no" to Băsescu's impeachment, whereas 24.75% voted for the president's stepping down.

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[3] *Source: ***, 2008, http://stat.trafic.ro/stat/basescuro/vizitatori/luna/#stat*

2. Metaphorical representations in referendum campaigns – towards an aggressive reality

The act of playing, that both politics and humour rely on, is essential within the process of representation. Johan Huizinga ([1938] 2007: 86) associates the etymology of the word "play" (Lat. *ludus, ludere*) not only with the child play, competition or gambling, but also with the syntagm "to embody something". At a structure level, representation could be linked to the four semiotic systems in social semiotics (see Kress, van Leeuwen [1996] 2006; van Leeuwen 2005). We have briefly analyzed above the way in which interactive participants (voters) had an active participation within the process of (creative) voting. We will analyse the voters' pictorial works taking into account the other three semiotic systems, namely represented participants, composition and multimodality.

Representation is the combination between:

- *experience* – a flowing from the past uses of semiotic resources towards their potential and actual uses, van Leeuwen 2005: 4);

- *imagination* – a game of epistemic modalities because "(…) it fills the semiological void of *what it is* with the ontological referent of *what should or could be*" (Frigioiu 2004: 14, translated into English by – C.M.C.).

Out of this interweaving, there spring forth pictorial metaphors which are the best embodiment of creativity. This innovation process lies on some destructive concepts (deviation, Chomsky 1964; allotopy, Groupe µ 1977) which finally seem to resolve the discrepancies between scripts or input mental spaces through coping theories (see "mapping", Lakoff, Johnson 1981; "blending theory" Fauconnier, Turner 2002). In order to deal with the creative incongruities within the pictorial metaphors we will adopt Marcel Danesi's cognitive flow theory on metaphors because it solves "the synthetic framework for interpreting the diverse, multiform manifestations of the many *layers* of metaphor in human symbolic and communicative behaviour" (Danesi 2002: 2) that the conceptual metaphor theory seems to lack. The concept of flowing through three layers of our mental representation is actually based on Charles Sanders Peirce's three categories (firstness, secondness, thirdness):

Charles Peirce (CP 8.328) **Categories – signification**	**Marcel Danesi (2002)** **Metaphors – metaphorization**
Firstness: quality.	*Layer of metaforms*: an experiential abduction, from an *association-by-inference* process
Secondness: causality, reality, actuality, or factuality	*Layer of meta-metaforms*: indexicality in reference
Thirdness: representation, thought, continuity, order, unity, or generality	*Layer of metasymbols*: traces to a culture's historical past, being governed by conventions.

Apparently Băsescu had been the first to initiate this innovative way of positioning discursive participants in his letters to the Romanian voters. At the beginning of the campaign, Băsescu uses the metaform layer of the red hot pepper in order to appeal to the memory of the citizens. The red hot pepper is the indexical referent for the meta-metaform layer of the President himself. In the 2004 presidential campaign, Băsescu made use of the macro and micro-semiotic levels of the red hot pepper (see Cmeciu, Wąsik 2008: 146) in order for the Romanians to perform the cognitive flow of pungent characteristics of a red hot pepper towards the future president. It is this indexical representation of Băsescu as an action person (quick-tempered in his deeds and fierce in his speech) which urged the citizens to take action: "You have proved before that you are powerful through your wise creations. In the digital era each of us can communicate, and not just

peacefully watch the TV. Grab again the pixels and (re)create the digital guerilla" (Traian Băsescu 2007; translated into English by – C.M.C.).

Having as empirical data 44 pictorial metaphors based on the meta-metaform layer of the 322 MPs against Băsescu, we will focus our analysis on the following hypotheses:

- *At the level of participants*

H1. The focus on citizens is more prominent verbally than nonverbally.

- *At the level of composition & multimodality*

H2. The salience of intertexts is more prominent in the opponents' representations than in Băsescu's representation.

H3. The negative attributes associated to the opponents are more prominent than the positive attributes associated to Traian Băsescu.

2.1. Implicit forms of "to vote"

The four ads addressed to the citizens do not depict the voters through a nonverbal representation, thus the first hypothesis is confirmed. This lack of visual embodiment does not imply denial but, on the contrary, it is a safety measure of not assigning a face only to a category of voters. Thus, the verbal embodiment and the visual contextual settings are better ways of mentally positioning the citizens.

The novelty of this referendum campaign was the threefold active presence of the Romanians: producers (of pictorial work), verbally represented participants and interpreters. This last embodiment is compulsory in innovative actions because humor necessarily involves the presence of the third person capable of assigning meaning to the creative act. The four texts embodying the citizens are the following:

For the lack of respect towards the Romanians, give them a fine on the 19th of May!

Pay them back on the 19th of May!

Would you like to play as they do …?

If you notice some thefts, bribery or ... Call 8989322!!! In order to be sure that it won't be discovered! (translated into English by – CMC)

This discursive play on the implicit forms of the verb "to vote" could be explained in terms of the cognitive flow:

- *the layer of metaform* is achieved through four iconic signs (number plates, a bill, hopscotch and a warning ad);
- *the layer of meta-metaform* is rendered through indexicality, the citizen being cognitively embodied as a policeman, as the Governor of the Romanian National Bank, as a child and as a responsible consumer.

This flow from the first to the second layer is achieved through irony defined by Linda Hutcheon (1994: 38) as "a value judgment charged with emotion". The amusement stirred through these verbally metaphorical embodiments is focused on the responsibility assigned to the Romanians.

2.2. Intertextual humor – the visual representation of the 322 MPs and Traian Băsescu

The 2007 referendum campaign was built on two types of intertextual humor:

- *the aggressive humor*, defined by Rod A. Martin (2007: 211) as unhealthy and potentially detrimental humor. It was targeted against Băsescu's opponents (322 MPs). Satire being the underlying concept, the 322 MPs, as indexical

referents of the Romanian Parliament, are laughed at. Actually the issue that Traian Băsescu wanted to frame was that of the actual oligarchy, and not the previous corruption (Teodorescu, Sultănescu 2007: 117).

- *the self-enhancing humour* or the relatively healthy and adaptive type of humour (Martin 2007: 211) which has Traian Băsescu as main target, the underlying concept being irony.

Both embodiments of humour mainly rely on intertextuality as the new object (the picture of nonpower – 322 MPs or the picture of power – Traian Băsescu) is achieved after a transaction process between the mental space of the referendum object, on the one hand, and the mental space of the helper-object or of the blocker-object, on the other hand. Within this cognitive interweaving of apparently different scripts it is worth mentioning the etymology of the word *satire*, which actually resembles the whole process of intertextuality. "Satire" comes from the Latin *satura* and it is "a peppery collection of heterogeneous parts – a recipe potentially available to all genres but defying generic definition" (Herman, Jahn, Ryan 2005: 512). This strange combination is solved by voters who, through memory, become the inhabitants of a certain social and cultural space, and who, through imagination, become spectators to a political show enhanced by humorous simulacra.

The most prominent intertexts used to embody the 322 MPs were:

- characters from well-known movies (*The Godfather, Gone with the Wind, Dumb and Dumber, Jurassic Park, Ali Baba and the 44 Thieves*) – *in praesentia conjoined pictorial metaphors.* This type of metaphor presupposes the interpenetration of parts of the perceived and the conceived elements. Thus all the six pictorial metaphors were built on a mixture of some pertinent parts of the two elements. The logic beyond these metaphors against the MPs is based on a process of recognition. The perceived elements (the 322 MPs) are always rendered through the most visible pertinent part, namely the face. For example, Jim Carrey's and Jeff Daniels's remarkable gestures are facially embodied by Mircea Geoană (the leader of the Social Democratic Party) or by Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu (the Prime Minister); the famous kissing scene between Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh is embodied into Dinu Patriciu (a well-known CEO of a petroleum group and a NLP member) and Calinne Tariciano (the innovative feminine counterpart of Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu); Alibaba's and the thieves' clothes are metaphorically worn by Mircea Geoană, Dinu Patriciu and Corneliu-Vadim Tudor (the leader of GRP). Beyond the metaform layer of these iconic facial representations, there is a cognitive flow towards the meta-metaform layer of stupidity and clumsiness, of money laundry in politics or of theft.

- pigs and insects – *in absentia conjoined pictorial metaphors.* This type of metaphor presupposes the absence of the perceived element which is to be inferred from the contextual information provided in the respective visual text. Disgust was the signified mostly used for the representation of the 322 MPs. The layer of metaforms was provided by pigs (67%), ants (11%), cockroaches (11%) and parasites (11%). Through a cognitive flow, we reach the layer of meta-metaforms which is rendered through innovative habitats for these animals and insects. These habitats are the combination of the animals' subjective space and some indexes of the 322 MPs. Thus, pigs (the MPs) are to become pork meat in tins; after being embarked on trains, they will be deported; the ants are going to be killed using a spray; and the invasion of the cockroaches is to be exterminated. The layer of metasymbols is reached exactly through this process of disembodying the 322 MPs and their complete embodying into animals and insects. The satirical force of these metaphors is great since it is achieved through the human body, a sensorial space. The cognitive flow from a visual perception (perceived and conceived elements) towards an implicit universal tactile perception has as its final target, a feeling of repulsion. Thus, the impact implies the cognitive accomplishment of a thermic space of coldness and physical rejection.

Traian Băsescu's representation is mainly achieved through *in praesentia conjoined* pictorial metaphors since it is obligatory for him to be recognized by voters. Unlike his opponents, the possibility of intertexts is scarce because positive attributes are better framed within only one signified, namely power, thus the second hypothesis (the salience of intertexts is more prominent in the opponents' representations than in Băsescu's representation) and the third hypothesis (the negative attributes associated to the opponents are more prominent than the positive attributes associated to Traian Băsescu) are confirmed. There is a twofold embodiment of power:

- *the physical power*. It is achieved through the isotopy created by chains, bullets, swords or shields that Traian Băsescu has to fight against or has to use in order to fight back and to protect himself.
- *the supreme authority*. The instance of self-enhancing humor is rendered through the intertext of the national personification of USA, namely Uncle Sam, dressed with clothes that metonymically send to the flag of the US (red and white stripes and white stars on a blue band). The famous syntagm "I want you" is recontextualized into the American-Romanian linguistic interweaving "I want (N)U", where "nu" is a the metaform layer of the American "no", but, at the same time, it is the meta-metaform layer of the way in which Romanians should vote, namely against Traian Băsescu's impeachment.

3. Conclusion

Out of this political polarity between the 322 MPs and Traian Băsescu, the latter won at a twofold level:
- *at the level of a possible world*. The metaphorical representations produced by the Romanian citizens were clearly directed against the 322 MPs and the negative attributes had been framed within more downplaying intertexts.
- *at the level of reality.* This unconventional political campaign is backgrounded by two facts: (a) the institution of Presidency/ the President has always had trust rates higher than the Romanian Parliament (2005 – 52% vs 16%; 2006 – 48% vs 14%; 2007 – 41% vs 13%, Teodorescu, Sultănescu 2007: 114, 121); (b) the decrease of the MPs' number within the agenda-setting of the referendum was the issue[4] which had the highest rate (77%).

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[4] Source: POLIS 4 Survey, Data Media-Institutul PRO (Teodorescu, Sultănescu 2007: 116).

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